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ABSTRACT

Existing equity strategies for postcompulsory education and training in Australia were examined to assess their effectiveness in a learning society. First, the equity and access policies in schools, vocational education and training (VET), higher education, and adult community education were compared. Next, educational outcomes of target groups in each sector were examined to identify patterns of participation for specific disadvantaged groups and to determine the extent to which structural factors affect patterns of participation in each sector. The feasibility of developing access and equity policies that would transcend sectoral boundaries was also explored. The following were among the study's key findings: (1) government equity strategies could be improved by targeting low socioeconomic status students within all equity groups, reporting performance so as to focus on outcomes, and strengthening pathways to employment from education and training; (2) performance reporting could be improved by collecting and publishing data in all sectors to the standard set by the VET sector; and (3) although it is not necessary to redefine equity in the

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context of lifelong learning, governments may need to develop new approaches to equity policies and programs to ensure that workers are able to participate effectively in the knowledge economy. (Contains 130 references.) (MN)

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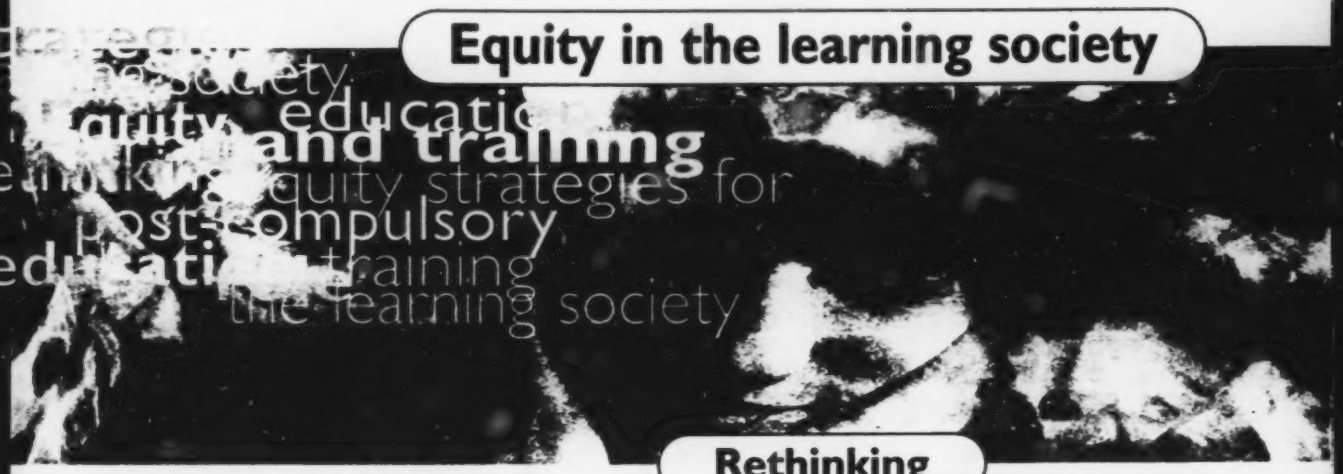
# Equity in the learning society

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# Equity in the learning society

## Rethinking equity strategies for post-compulsory education and training

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NCVER

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# Foreword

This study of equity strategies in post-compulsory education and training resulted from a collaborative project undertaken for the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) by the LifeLong Learning Network and Global Learning Services.

The LifeLong Learning researcher was Dr Louise Watson.

Global Learning Services researchers were Dr Barry Cameron, Dr John Grant, and Mr Peter Kearns.

The role of co-ordinating and editing the final report was undertaken by Ms Beverley Pope of the LifeLong Learning Network.

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# Executive summary

This report was prepared under the auspices of the Lifelong Learning Network and was intended to contribute to the discussion of cross-sectoral policy issues in post-compulsory education and training. In Australian education and training, traditional divisions are breaking down as students increasingly move between the sectors in the pursuit of lifelong learning. A cross-sectoral perspective is needed if governments are to respond effectively to these changing patterns of demand.

The researchers' first task was to review the equity and access policies in schools, vocational education and training, higher education and adult community education to determine the similarities and differences between the sectors (research question two). In the second chapter of this report the authors describe each sector's equity and access policies based on published policy statements by education and training authorities in each sector, usually at the ministerial level. The project found more similarities than differences in the equity policies for each sector. The authors conclude that government equity strategies could be improved by:

- targetting low socio-economic status (SES) students within all equity groups
- identifying two new target groups: those with low skills and the long-term unemployed
- reporting performance in a way that focusses on the outcomes (in addition to the outputs) of education and training
- strengthening pathways to employment from education and training

The second stage of the project compared the educational outcomes of target groups in each sector to see what the data told us about patterns of participation for disadvantaged groups (research question three) and the extent to which structural factors impact on patterns of participation in each sector (research question four). The comparative analysis in the third chapter suggests that participation by disadvantaged groups is higher in sectors where education and training provision is more decentralised (such as vocational education and training [VET] or regional universities) but concludes that this issue requires further research. The task of comparing data on equity outcomes was hampered by a lack of comparability between data in each sector and the limitations of the data collections in some sectors. The report suggests that performance reporting could be improved by collecting and publishing data in all sectors to the standard set by the vocational education and training sector. It would be easier to make cross-sectoral comparisons of educational outcomes if the following changes were made to each sector's data collection:

- adoption of the same sets of criteria for identifying equity target groups
- reporting outcomes for two additional sub-groups: people with low skills and people who are long-term unemployed
- capturing the socio-economic status of students by identifying at point of enrolment the highest educational level and occupation of the student's parents
- publishing data by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) labour force region

The research team were also asked if there were any new social and economic barriers to participation and the likely impact of such developments on achieving equality of educational outcomes (research question one). The fourth chapter of the report describes the shifting context for access and equity policies associated with economic globalisation and rising income inequality. The growth of the knowledge economy has deepened the polarisation between people who are 'learning rich' and able to profit from new employment opportunities and the low-skilled who are increasingly marginal to the labour market and mainstream society. The rising level of overall participation in education and training has ensured that outcomes for disadvantaged groups—although improving on many indicators—remain behind those of the total population. Without a continuing commitment to equity in education and training policy, these new social and economic conditions could erode any improvements in educational outcomes for disadvantaged social groups. The importance of lifelong learning in a global labour market therefore strengthens the imperative for improving equity outcomes in all sectors of education and training.

A further objective of this project was to examine the feasibility of developing access and equity policies that would transcend the sectoral boundaries of schools, vocational education and training, higher education and adult community education (research question five). As Australia's education and training sectors are managed through different agencies under various levels of government, there are significant barriers to developing cross-sectoral policies in education and training. In spite of the similarities between the equity policies of each sector, it is not feasible for equity initiatives to be developed across the sectors within the current management frameworks. However in the fourth chapter the researchers suggest that local partnerships based on models such as 'Learning Cities' could provide a new framework for building cross-sectoral equity initiatives in education and training.

Finally, the researchers were asked whether a new definition of equity was necessary in the context of lifelong learning (research question six). As discussed in the opening chapter, equity is a difficult concept to define except in terms of a general notion of fairness within a policy framework that sees the distribution of education and training opportunities as a public good. If governments want to increase participation in lifelong learning (for example, to promote Australia's international competitiveness in the global economy) equity considerations will be increasingly important to policy development. The recent survey commissioned by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) under its marketing strategy for skills and lifelong learning project (ANTA 2000) found 49 per cent of Australians are unwilling to participate in further education or training. For a significant proportion of this group, traditional equity considerations such as lack of access or low income are the main reasons they do not participate in lifelong learning. While it is not necessary to redefine equity in the context of lifelong learning, governments may need to develop new approaches to equity policies and programs to ensure that workers are able to participate effectively in the knowledge economy.

# Equity and education policy

Australian education and training is currently undergoing a major transformation. As the economic importance of education and training increases there has been a rapid rise in participation at all levels, and governments are acknowledging the importance of lifelong learning to individual success and long-term national prosperity.

In this section we look briefly at current conceptions of equity and the social groups identified as under-represented in education and training. We argue that equity is, and will remain, a major social and political issue because it speaks to the most fundamental questions of how 'social goods' are distributed in our society.

Because governments will continue to play a major role in monitoring equity outcomes in all sectors of education and training in the future it is important that data collected on access, participation and outcomes are of the highest quality. In this section we outline the main sources of data currently available on equity outcomes (and drawn on later in this study) and make some general observations on the way current data collections limit the monitoring of educational outcomes for members of identified target groups.

It is argued that current data collections have a number of significant limitations and could be improved by:

- setting best practice benchmarks for all sectors
- using the same sets of criteria for identifying equity target groups
- adding two new sub-groups to the data collections: people with identified low skills and people who are unemployed (especially the long-term unemployed)
- capturing the socio-economic status of students in all sectors by identifying, in enrolment data, the highest educational level and occupation of the student's parents
- encouraging all sectors to publish data by Australian Bureau of Statistics labour force region

## Equity: A difficult concept

> *Equity can be described but not defined* (Meagher 1975, p.3).

One of the strategic objectives of the Australian National Training Authority is the achievement of 'equitable outcomes in vocational education and training' (ANTA 1998b). But the concept of equity in education and training is a difficult one to pin down. Two approaches to equity have, for example, been identified as underpinning policies in the vocational education and training sector: a social justice framework and a model that emphasises the management of diversity (ANTA 1998b, p.4).

## Public or private good?

Concerns about equity in education are closely linked to the definition of education and training as a public good (Marginson 1993). If the benefits of education and training were purely private, the distribution of education and training opportunities could be left to the market—a situation that existed prior to the Industrial Revolution.

Education and training continues to deliver significant private benefits to individuals in terms of lifetime income and employment. But at the same time, for almost two hundred years, governments have subsidised education and training—in part because they see it as a means to produce economic and social outcomes that will benefit society as a whole (Austin 1961; Silver & Silver 1974; Sturt 1967).

This tension between the private and public benefits of education and training ensures that the distribution of public subsidies for education and training come under scrutiny by those concerned with monitoring how the private benefits of education and training are distributed (see Tannock 1969; Connell, 1993). Long-standing policy objectives to promote equality in the distribution of educational opportunities have now been supplemented by a concern about the unfair distribution of educational outcomes (Anderson 1993; Karmel 1973; Teese 1994). It is well established that the various outcomes of education and training are not randomly distributed. The individuals obtaining the most favourable educational outcomes—in terms of personal income and social status—come from sub-groups characterised by high family income and high levels of education. Less favourable educational outcomes continue to be concentrated among sub-groups characterised by low levels of family income and low levels of education (Anderson & Western 1970; Shavit & Blossfield 1993; DEETYA 1997).

The concept of equity has not always been part of the fundamental policy rationale for government involvement in education and training. It can be argued, for example, that, in order to meet the government's policy goals, education and training outcomes should **not** be evenly distributed (see Harrison 1996). From this perspective concerns about equity form part of a more general critique of the role and purpose of government subsidies for education and training. This critique has been responded to by governments in various ways, including the introduction of more tightly targetted policies and programs to address equity issues.

But as Meagher points out, equity is best described rather than defined. The concept speaks to our notions of fairness. It also relates to sets of social relationships that are embedded in specific contexts. As such, it speaks to a changing landscape of social and economic advantage and disadvantage. It is to this changing landscape that much of the current concern to improve cross-sectorial provision and to foster life-long learning, and develop life-long learners, is addressed.

## Targetting equity policies to specific groups

For over 25 years the Australian Government has implemented equity programs in education and training targetted at specific social groups. The rationale for equity programs is that the outcomes of education and training are not randomly distributed throughout the population. As the public education and training system was created to offer equality of access to education and training, it became a policy concern when the outcomes of education and training remained unevenly distributed.

The distribution of education and training outcomes still reflects the distribution of family background characteristics such as wealth and parents' educational attainment. In spite of high levels of public investment (inputs) in education and training, members of specific social groups remain under-represented in terms of participation (outputs) and achievement (outcomes) (see Ainley & Long 1998).

Recognising that individuals from sub-groups of the population appeared to face common barriers to participation in education and training, governments have targetted equity policies

to specific groups, and implemented programs to address their common needs. The six population sub-groups that are the target of equity policies in most sectors of education and training are:

- Indigenous Australians
- people with a disability
- people from low socio-economic (SES) backgrounds
- women and girls
- people from rural and isolated backgrounds
- people from non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB)

Recent equity policies have also focussed on people with low skills, particularly in literacy and numeracy competence.

Since the 1980s Commonwealth labour market programs have directed education and training assistance to the long-term unemployed, although unemployed people are not generally identified as an equity group in sector-based policies. Equity groups are identified by sector in table 1. The main difference in equity groups between the sectors is that low-socio-economic status students are not identified as a target group in the vocational education and training sector. This is probably because this sector caters for a higher proportion of students from low socio-economic backgrounds than from high socio-economic backgrounds.

**Table 1: Equity groups identified by sector**

| | Schools | Vocational education and training | Higher education | Adult community education |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Indigenous Australians | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| People with a disability | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Low SES | Yes | No | Yes | Yes |
| Women/girls | Yes | Yes | Yes | No |
| Rural and isolated | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| NESB | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Low skills | Yes | Yes | No | Yes |
| Unemployed/ Not in labour force | No | No | No | Yes |

Sources: MCEETA 1999b, p.4; ANTA 1998a; NBEET 1996; MCEETYA 1997, p.8

## Reporting performance on equity objectives

> *As more and more emphasis is placed on a results-oriented and client-sensitive culture and on devolution, and as the environment of public sector management becomes more diverse and complex, the importance of effective accountability becomes correspondingly greater* (OECD 1995, p.37).

The demand for systematic monitoring of program outcomes emerged during the 1980s, with the advent of 'new managerialism' in the public service, which recognised the changing nature of public accountability in the Australian public sector. In return for increased autonomy, public sector managers were expected to be more accountable to the community for the results of the programs they manage (Uhr 1998, pp.164–6). The 1990s were characterised by debates about how public accountability for government policies and programs could be improved in the wake of this major public sector reform. Education and

training expenditure was an important target of discussions about how to improve the reporting of public sector performance (SEETRC 1995).

Education and training provision at the post-compulsory level is characterised by a high level of collaboration between the Commonwealth Government and State Governments. This form of 'collaborative executive federalism' (Carroll & Painter 1995, p.15) poses an additional challenge for those concerned about monitoring government performance. Inter-governmental agencies such as ANTA are often seen as being less accountable than individual ministers or governments because ministerial councils exercise a form of power and authority cut off from conventional accountability mechanisms such as parliamentary scrutiny (Pendal 1995). Critics have argued that the information provided to parliament about inter-governmental policies and programs is less adequate and less easily scrutinised than activities carried out by one level of government (Saunders 1985, 1986; Else-Mitchell 1986; SEETRC 1995, p.130).

As most post-compulsory education and training is delivered within an inter-governmental framework where traditional lines of ministerial responsibility are blurred, the sector must use a range of accountability mechanisms to demonstrate its effectiveness. Public accountability in education and training is supported by performance information such as evaluations, reviews, parliamentary inquiries, and annual reports. These documents provide the basis for a constructive dialogue between government agencies and a community of stakeholders about the effectiveness of government policies. The usefulness of this dialogue as an accountability instrument depends on the quality of the performance information provided by government. In education and training, as in all sectors of government, the minimum standard required of performance information is that 'objectives can be determined and achieved, that inputs and outputs can be measured, and ... relevant performance indicators can be constructed for all public sector activities' (Guthrie & Parker 1990, p.456). Performance indicators in education and training can only be constructed from data on students' educational outcomes.

Over the last decade, governments have placed greater emphasis on collecting data to demonstrate the performance of education and training programs. Maintaining comprehensive statistical collections of a high quality is a fundamental prerequisite for monitoring the effectiveness of government policies and programs, particularly in respect to improving educational outcomes for the educationally disadvantaged. However as the following sections show, there are gaps in the state of performance reporting in relation to equity groups in each of the education and training sectors.

## Cross-sectoral

In post-compulsory education and training the equity programs of Commonwealth Government and State Governments have been evaluated in a variety of ways. Although many equity programs have been reviewed, most of this research has been commissioned on a sectoral basis. As long as programs are delivered within sectoral boundaries, performance reporting is likely to remain sector-specific. However, as the objectives of equity policies extend beyond specific programs or sectors, we need cross-sectoral analyses to see equity outcomes in the right perspective.

The data collections on student outcomes in more than one sector are limited and even less cross-sectoral data are collected on equity groups. NCVER is moving towards more cross-sectoral data collections, with its data on participation in personal enrichment courses (that is adult and community education [ACE]) and on VET in schools. However even these data are difficult to compare on a cross-sectoral basis because of different definitions of student load and course completion in each sector. These definitional issues reflect major differences in the financing and delivery of education and training between the sectors and cannot be resolved in the short-term.

The only equity sub-group for which data has been compiled across the education and training sectors is Indigenous Australians. The unique cross-sectoral and longitudinal analysis of Indigenous education and training outcomes by Robinson and Bamblett (1998) provides a

rare perspective on educational outcomes for this equity group. In spite of the inconsistencies between each sector's data collections, it is important to continue to produce studies of equity outcomes that provide a basis for cross-sectoral comparisons of performance.

## Adult community education

As adult community education is a small sector, and of informal provision, the quality of its performance information varies from State to State. The extent to which the sector is organised by State education authorities has a significant influence on the data available. The website of the Adult Community and Further Education (ACFE) Board in Victoria, for example, provides up-to-date statistics on participation, including some reference to equity groups. This is, however, the exception rather than the rule.

Further difficulties in compiling data on provision in this sector arise from such factors as:

- adult community education is offered by a range of non-government authorities
- courses are funded by a range of agencies, including user-pays
- many courses are offered within TAFE institutions

NCVER collects and publishes information on participation in personal enrichment programs, funded wholly or in part from public financial resources. In 1997, 379 700 clients or 3.1 per cent of the 15–64-year-old population undertook personal enrichment programs. This represented an apparent decline of 46 600 students or 11 per cent since 1996, which may have been due to enhancements in the national data collection (NCVER 1999c, p.6). Participation in these programs is highest between the ages of 30 and 50 years and the clients are on average older—at 40.8 years—than VET clients, at 31.6 years. A larger proportion of the clients of personal enrichment courses are women and course provision is concentrated in city areas. The NCVER publication is an important contribution to performance reporting in ACE, although the figures are likely to understate the level of participation, because some programs are offered by welfare agencies or other non-government providers.

The quality of performance information on ACE may improve under the recently revised *National policy on adult community education* (MCEETYA 1997). The national policy provides a framework that aims to 'recognise, enhance and support' the sector. The first annual report on progress claims that enrolments are increasing, funding has increased in the areas of accredited training and literacy, and more provision is being funded in rural and remote communities.

## Schools

School education is provided by State and Territory Governments with financial support from the Commonwealth Government. Since the late 1980s, there has been a collaborative approach to national schooling policies, carried by the Ministerial Council of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA). This body has defined national goals for schooling that include equity objectives, and has adopted an agreed framework for reporting performance against national policy goals.

The annual *National report on schooling* is MCEETYA's main national accountability instrument for school education expenditure but it does not provide meaningful information on educational outcomes. Its contents are predominantly focussed on inputs and its outcome measures are too simple or too highly aggregated to shed light on school and system performance. The less than comprehensive information provided in the *National report* means that the Commonwealth Government is unable to report on either the performance of its own programs or on the outcomes of school education throughout Australia. The annual *National report on schooling* is published more than two years after the data are collected, and it focusses on inputs and outputs rather than on educational outcomes. The data provided on targetted social groups are not comprehensive and vary considerably between the States. The sample studies on equity groups sponsored by DETYA from time to time vary in methodology and do not provide longitudinal data. The *National report on schooling* was a first step towards

enhancing accountability for school education expenditure, but it should be possible to further improve the quality of performance information on schooling.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) produces a more current national data collection on student participation in schools based on enrolment data, but the only outcomes data is Year 12 retention and this is not provided by target group. With the establishment of its new National Centre for Education and Training Statistics (see below) the ABS may be able to improve the quality of data on schooling to a standard comparable with the publications of the vocational education and training and higher education sectors.

## Higher education

Equity objectives for higher education were identified in the report, *A fair chance for all: Higher education that's within everyone's reach* (Commonwealth of Australia 1990). This document identified six equity groups and set specific performance targets for two of them, and identified appropriate actions and strategies for the rest. Since then, the Commonwealth has monitored the achievement of equity targets in the higher education sector, and these data were published in a major report by NBEET in 1996 and again by DETYA in an occasional paper called *Equity in higher education* (1999a). This report provides longitudinal data on the participation and outcomes of equity groups by institution and by State, compared with the general student population. The report makes a valuable contribution to performance information on equity groups in the higher education sector.

There is a range of other research—quantitative, qualitative, action-oriented—on equity issues in higher education in Australia. The Evaluations and Investigations Program (EIP) studies commissioned by DETYA, for example, cover several aspects of equity ranging from the performance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to the effects on designated groups of the introduction of fees at the postgraduate level.

One deficiency in performance reporting for equity groups in higher education is the lack of information on employment outcomes. The graduate destinations survey for higher education is conducted by the Graduate Careers Council of Australia (GCCA) on behalf of the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee. The GCCA collects the data on equity groups but does not publish it except for a breakdown between males and females (GCCA 1999). Although the data can be purchased from the GCCA, the absence of published data diminishes the accountability of the higher education sector in terms of monitoring the employment outcomes of social groups.

## Vocational education and training

The Australian National Training Authority defines equity as one of its five strategic objectives in its policy statement *A bridge to the future: Australia's national strategy for vocational education and training for the period 1998–2003* (ANTA 1998b). In 1998, ANTA released a supporting paper to the national strategy titled *Achieving equitable outcomes*, providing a stocktake of progress and setting strategic directions for equity (ANTA 1998a). ANTA recently commissioned a review of equity projects (Kearns & Grant 1999) and a review of effective strategies for equity, titled *Workable solutions* (Robertson & Barrera 1999). In addition, a wide range of research reports on equity outcomes in vocational education and training are commissioned by the NCVER on a regular basis.

The performance information provided by ANTA in respect to vocational education and training relies heavily on data collected by NCVER. The NCVER collects and publishes a comprehensive and accessible data collection on outcomes for equity groups based on both administrative collections and surveys. Publications such as *Australian vocational education and training statistics 1998 student outcomes survey national report* (NCVER 1999a) provide detailed data and analyses of student outcomes on a wide range of indicators. The NCVER statistical publications on student participation and outcomes are accessible, timely and readable documents. The NCVER student outcomes survey now reports data on module outcomes, as well as other indicators of retention and completion. Data are reported by a range of student

characteristics including sex, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) status, NESB and disability in both the statistical collections and the graduate destinations survey.

Through its graduate destinations survey, NCVER is able to report employment outcomes for most equity groups. In addition, NCVER produces detailed studies of outcomes for the specific social groups identified in ANTA's equity strategy. NCVER publications such as *Indigenous students 1996: An overview*, *Students with disabilities 1996: An Overview*, and *Students from non-English speaking backgrounds 1996: An overview* provide an excellent synthesis of data on specific equity groups. The statistical publications produced by NCVER and its specific reports on equity groups contribute to the high quality of performance reporting for the vocational education and training sector.

## Improving performance information

National data collections on education and training are a key accountability instrument for government agencies in reporting their performance. Recent reforms have improved the quality and relevance of data collections for analysing trends in participation and client outcomes. While we should allow time for the impact of these reforms to be appreciated, the momentum for further changes in existing collections will continue as students increasingly move between the sectors and the policy objectives of education and training recognise the importance of lifelong learning. The ABS is in the process of establishing a National Education and Training Statistics Unit that aims to improve the quality and comparability of data on education and training. However this unit will rely heavily on the data collections currently produced by each education and training sector.

This report has identified a number of strategies that could be adopted to improve the data collections in each education and training sector. These strategies are looked at below.

### Best practice benchmarks

The agencies responsible for compiling data on education and training outcomes in each sector—schools education, vocational education and training, adult community education and higher education—should aspire to the best practice benchmarks set by the data collections for other sectors, namely:

- comprehensive annual statistical collections drawn from student enrolment data, and published free of charge on the worldwide web (for example, higher education statistics collection maintained by DETYA [see DETYA 1998b, 1999a]). These collections should contain student background information collected at the point of enrolment, as well as data on retention and educational outcomes
- regular (for example, bi-annual) reports focussing on education and training outcomes for specific social groups, based largely on the annual statistical collections (for example, NCVER's publications on equity groups [see 1998b, 1996])
- annual graduate destinations surveys to monitor employment outcomes by social group (for example, NCVER's graduate destinations survey [see 1999a, 1998a])
- survey data on the reasons why members of specific groups do not participate in education and training should be published and made available to institutions to inform equity policies and programs

### Monitoring outcomes for sub-groups

All sectors of education and training should collect and publish data by the six social groups identified in this study, that is:

- Indigenous Australians
- people with a disability
- people from low socio-economic backgrounds

- women in non-traditional areas
- people from rural and isolated backgrounds
- people from non-English speaking backgrounds

Two additional sub-groups should be identified in the data collections and published reports: people with low skills (using, for example, non-completion of Year 12 as the criterion) and people who are unemployed (especially the long-term unemployed).

In addition, the socio-economic status of students should be captured in enrolment data in all sectors. This could be done by identifying the highest educational level and occupation of the student's parents (see the third chapter of this report for a more detailed discussion of these issues).

### Regional data

Finally, we suggest that all sectors should publish data by Australian Bureau of Statistics labour force region. This would facilitate a richer source of data analysis at the local level and would complement the range of other ABS social statistics.

## Role of equity in a learning society

> *Changes in the markets for Australian products and services, industry restructuring and technological change have all contributed to a growing acknowledgment that people need to upgrade and update their skills throughout their working lives* (ANTA 1998, p.3).

A nation of lifelong learners is a society of individuals who are motivated to learn and have the capacity to do so. Governments are increasingly concerned to ensure that the education and training system promotes lifelong learning. Economic changes such as the impact of globalisation and new technology underpin this new policy commitment to lifelong learning. As economic growth depends more on 'knowledge industries', individuals without the capacity for lifelong learning are at risk of becoming marginal to the labour force (OECD 1996). The 'deepening divide' between those who are involved in and those who are marginal to education and training places an estimated 300 000 young adults at risk of labour market disadvantage (Spierings 1999, p.10). The Delors report for UNESCO surmised in 1996:

> *To create tomorrow's society, imagination will have to keep ahead of technological progress in order to avoid further increases in unemployment and social exclusion or inequalities in development* (UNESCO 1996, p.16).

The concept of lifelong learning as defined by the OECD is to create a society of individuals who are motivated to continue learning throughout their lives—both formally and informally (OECD 1996). Australia's recent review of higher education defined a lifelong learner as a person who takes responsibility for their own learning and who is prepared to invest 'time, money and effort' in education or training on a continuous basis (Commonwealth of Australia 1998, p.43). In a global market, economic rewards are expected to flow to nations where workers are adaptable, flexible, skilled and capable of continuous learning. Such a workforce can only be generated by a society of lifelong learners—a 'learning society'.

The policy objective of lifelong learning for all poses new challenges for equity policies in education and training. To achieve higher levels of participation in education and training, governments need a better understanding of an individual's *motivation* and *capacity* to learn throughout their lives. A complex set of individual characteristics interacting with social and economic circumstances influences an individual's decision to undertake education or training. For example, in their study of VET participants from 'disadvantaged' social groups, Golding and Volkoff (1998b) classified participants into four motivational categories: worker; jobseeker; learner; and contributor.

The recent survey commissioned by ANTA under its *Marketing strategy for skills and lifelong learning* found 49 per cent of Australians are unwilling to participate in further education or training. Sixteen per cent of survey respondents said they would undertake education or training 'only if you made it easier' citing barriers such as time, lack of money and the inaccessibility of learning institutions (ANTA 2000). If governments want to increase the motivation of these individuals to participate in lifelong learning, these equity barriers will still to be addressed. On the other hand, initiatives that take a more holistic approach to community participation in learning (such as 'Learning Cities', for example) may also assist in meeting the needs of disadvantaged equity groups. The potential of new learning initiatives to assist in achieving equity goals is discussed in the fourth chapter of this report.

This report discusses the role of equity in a learning society from a cross-sectoral perspective. As a first step, we review the existing policies for promoting equity in each sector in the next chapter. In the following chapter we compare data on student outcomes for equity groups in each sector to see what the data tell us about patterns of participation for disadvantaged groups and the extent to which structural factors might impact on patterns of participation in each sector. The final chapter of the report looks at broader policy issues, such as the shifting social and economic context for equity policies and programs, and the feasibility of developing a cross-sectoral approach to equity in a learning society.

# Sectoral review of equity and access policies

The purpose of this section is to review some of the recent key reports into equity outcomes in each of the education and training sectors. Public funding of education and training has ensured that equity and access issues have remain major political and accountability concerns for Commonwealth Government and State Governments for many decades. As a result there is a considerable body of literature reviewing equity outcomes in Australian education and training.

In this report key recent reports in each sector are used to provide an overview of the current state of play in each sector. The sectors discussed are:

- vocational education and training
- adult community education
- schools education
- higher education

This review emphasises the resilience of the barriers facing those in the identified equity target groups. These barriers are maintained by structural factors, including changes in the labour market and work, as well as by general community attitudes and expectations. Equity strategies will therefore remain an important element of the policy development in all sectors of education and training. At the same time, however, broader alliances and partnerships should be fostered and strategies for lifelong learning should be encouraged.

## Vocational education and training

Enhancing equity in vocational education and training has been a key objective throughout the past decade of national training reform. This objective was given increased focus with the establishment of the Australian National Training Authority under the ANTA Agreement between the Commonwealth and States that came into operation in 1994. The ANTA role provided an instrument for Commonwealth and State collaboration in furthering equity objectives.

Strengthening accessibility was one of four key themes built into the ANTA national strategy for vocational education and training issued in 1994 (ANTA 1994). The national strategy was directed at the six under-represented groups identified by Commonwealth and State Ministers in 1991 in the *Common and agreed national goals for vocational education and training in Australia* (DEET 1991). These groups were:

- women
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- people without adequate social, literacy and numeracy skills
- people with disabilities
- rural and isolated people
- unemployed people

A broad mix of strategies was identified in the 1994 national strategy as instruments to advance access and participation for these groups. These included:

- the use of funding programs
- curriculum action
- improving school-to-work pathways
- strengthening literacy and English training
- responding to special needs in program design
- developing responsive strategies for each target group
- conducting extensive consultations

A key instrument in co-ordinating national, State/Territory, and institutional action was the role of funding agreements negotiated between ANTA and the State and Territories. Equity objectives were among the conditions built into this process and these were reflected in State and Territory profiles and in strategic planning for vocational education and training developments.

## 1996 review of progress

The 1994 national strategy was to be reviewed at the end of the 1995–1997 triennium to assess the progress made in relation to the target groups. This review was initiated in 1996 and included:

- the report *Participation and attainment of individual client groups within vocational education and training* (ANTA 1996b)
- a revised set of strategies: *Equity 2001: Strategies to achieve access and equity in vocational education and training for the new millennium* (ANTA 1996a)
- a literature review: *Stocktake of equity reports and literature* (ANTA 1997)

The 1996 equity review provided a comprehensive snapshot of access, participation, and outcomes after three years of Commonwealth/State collaboration. The report showed the following pattern:

- *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples:* low levels of educational attainment were reflected in low participation trends within the labour force with an employment profile skewed to the lower skill levels. Although access was reasonable, these people had lower success and graduation rates
- *women:* there was a low level of participation in vocational education and training with participation skewed towards the lower skill levels. Participation in TAFE was shown to be dropping. Graduation outcomes were poorer than males in terms of employment, course relevance and earnings
- *non-English-speaking background:* the wide differences in participation and attainment levels between different cultures were noted so that aggregate statistics needed to be treated with some caution. Outcomes were seen as poor with less participation in middle and higher-level courses and with more concentration in low-status, low-skilled occupations
- *people with a disability:* a strong pattern of disadvantage was shown to exist with participation skewed towards lower-skill levels, lower pass rates in modules, and with high levels of unemployment and low levels of participation in the labour force

The 1996 findings were substantially repeated for some groups, but not all, in the subsequent 1998 stocktake undertaken in association with the release of the ANTA *National strategy for 1998–2003.*

*Equity 2001* (ANTA 1996a) was the response to these assessments. This document set outcomes to be achieved by the year 2001 and included a ten-point approach to give effect to a set of five guiding principles. The ten points in this equity strategy were:

- improving funding arrangements
- improving discriminatory attitudes
- improving basic work and life skills
- eliminating bias in competency standards, curriculum, teaching and course requirements
- increasing recognition of prior learning assessments
- improving flexible delivery
- making training more relevant
- increasing levels of language, literacy and numeracy skills
- improving student and employee support

The underpinning principles set out in *Equity 2001* included the important one that 'individuals, along with industry and enterprises, are clients of vocational education and training' (p.5). It is questionable how far this principle has been applied and subsequent research has pointed to tensions in the economic and social objectives of vocational education and training in a context of dominance of economic rationalism objectives and market driven policies (Anderson 1998 p.60; Golding & Volkoff 1998b, p.108).

Research has also suggested that tensions between economic and social objectives have impacted on strategies adopted across all the equity target groups. These tensions are examined in the collection of papers brought together in *Different drums one beat* (Ferrier & Anderson 1998).

A significant action taken by ANTA at this time was the establishment of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People's Training Advisory Council (ATSIPTAC) and a Disability Forum. Both these bodies have worked to develop national strategies to advance equity objectives.

The Vocational Education Employment and Training (VEET) Women's Taskforce was also established to advance equity for women in vocational education and training with Commonwealth action. In 1996 the task force issued *A national women's vocational education and training strategy* with a supporting implementation guide.

Equity pilot projects were also funded, in line with its 1996 equity strategies, as well as some equity projects under the auspices of the VEET Women's Taskforce. A 1998 review of the equity projects pointed to the high quality and effective[illegible]s of the Women's Taskforce projects. These appeared to have gained from the networks built up over some years between the States/Territories and national bodies (Kearns & Grant 1999). Such networks did not exist to the same extent for other equity target groups, and the researchers concluded that the work of the VEET Women's Taskforce and the role of its vocational education and training strategy, provided a sound model of a national co-operative approach to equity (Kearns & Grant 1999, p.29).

## State and Territory action

In a short overview of this nature it is not feasible to discuss the range of approaches adopted by the States and Territories and by vocational education and training institutions to advance equity objectives. These approaches have differed somewhat in their philosophies and strategies. Two distinct approaches have been identified (see ANTA 1998a, p.4). The first of these, a social justice approach, adopted by States such as New South Wales, links equity in vocational education and training to a broad range of life experiences and circumstances that inhibit equitable outcomes. These include a broad range of economic, social, attitudinal, legislative and administrative factors.

On the other hand, the managing diversity approach, as adopted in Victoria, placed emphasis on the vocational education and training system being responsive in its work to the needs of a diverse client base. According to this approach, responding to diversity should be reflected in

all aspects of vocational education and training work. In its 1998 equity reviews ANTA took the position that these approaches to equity share much in common.

## 1998 review of equity

In 1998 the Australian National Training Authority undertook a further review of equity in association with the release of *A bridge to the future: Australia's national strategy for vocational education and training for the period 1998–2003* (ANTA 1998b). Equity was identified in the national strategy as one of five strategic objectives and was articulated in the following terms:

Increased and improved access to, and outcomes from, vocational education and training in identified areas of disadvantage, including those areas highlighted in this strategy.

The 1998 review of equity include the following components:

- the release of a supporting paper to the national strategy titled *Achieving equitable outcomes*. This provided another stocktake of progress and set strategic directions for equity (ANTA 1998a)
- a review of equity projects (Kearns & Grant 1999)
- a review of effective strategies for equity, titled *Workable solutions* (Robertson & Barrera 1999)

The overview set out in *Achieving equitable outcomes* showed progress in a number of respects:

- Overall participation by women was only slightly lower than men, while the overall completion rates were comparable.
- Participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was now higher than their representation in the community as a whole (2.4% to 2.0%).
- People from non-English-speaking backgrounds were represented in the same proportion as in the population overall (12.9% to 13.2%).
- Participation from people in rural and isolated areas (7.9% and 8.3% respectively) compared favourably with the participation rate for the population as a whole (7.2%)

While this overall extent of access by disadvantaged groups to vocational education and training was heartening, it was also evident that major equity problems remained, including:

- Participation by women continued to be confined to a narrow range of programs and little progress had been made in non-traditional areas.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were mainly clustered in training programs at the lower end of the qualifications spectrum and continued to have poor success rates and employment outcomes, with unemployment rates three times higher than for non-indigenous Australians.
- People with a disability continued to be under-represented and had higher attrition rates than other students.
- Low levels of literacy and numeracy for a significant proportion of the community continued to be a barrier to participation.

These findings suggest that while equity policies and programs had made a useful contribution in extending participation, the barriers to equitable outcomes were deeply entrenched. Alternative approaches needed to be found to address these barriers in a more holistic, strategic, and systemic way. This point appears to be recognised by ANTA in the introduction to *Achieving equitable outcomes:*

> *The policy view of equity underpinning both the National Strategy itself and this supporting paper is one which argues for a shift of emphasis away from solely focussing on 'target groups' towards a position which gives greater emphasis on measuring the capacity of the vocational education and training system to respond to the diverse needs of clients and potential clients* (ANTA 1998a, p.1).

This perspective is consistent with a lifelong learning approach that would place the learner at the centre of a flexible, demand driven system that is responsive to the 'diverse needs of clients'.

The recognition by ANTA that a new approach is needed has led to a focus on what are seen as three critical elements:

- overcoming or removing structural inequities
- implementing targetted responses to equity based on 'workable solutions'
- introducing resource allocation strategies and incentives that encourage responsiveness to client needs

The third of these elements is critical if a systemic response to equity objectives is to be achieved. Providing incentives for individuals, institutions and employers opens up a broad spectrum of alternative policy options. Among these are entitlement schemes and the option of individual learning accounts. Both these approaches are currently being implemented in Britain.

The 1998 review of ANTA equity projects showed that a broad spectrum of effective strategies had been identified (Kearns & Grant 1999). The challenge is to move beyond a project and program phase of equity to making equity systemic in vocational education and training operations. The *Workable solutions* study added to the well-developed knowledge base of what are effective equity strategies (Robertson & Barrera 1999). Their findings have much in common with the Kearns and Grant review.

## Adult community education

A feature of adult community education policy in the past decade has been the development of a national vision that links the role of the sector to the promotion of lifelong learning in Australian society and to key equity objectives.

### A national policy

The development of a national vision and identity for adult community education was stimulated by the landmark 1991 report of the Senate Employment, Education and Training Committee *Come in Cinderella: The emergence of adult and community education* (SEETRC 1991). The perceived 'Cinderella' status of adult community education led to the emergence of the policy document, *National policy for adult and community education*, endorsed by the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) in 1993 and revised in 1997 as the current national policy.

The 1997 national policy was built around a vision of Australia as a cohesive, inclusive learning society. It defined adult community education as a learner-centred, responsive, community-oriented form of education provision which is accessible and inclusive and oriented to lifelong learning (MCEETYA 1997).

Strategic objective 6 in the policy was targetted at 'fostering inclusiveness' and is directed at greater participation in adult community education by various disadvantaged groups with equity principles built into all adult community education services (MCEETYA 1997, p.15).

In spite of these developments the Cinderella character of adult community education remains—paradoxically in a world moving towards lifelong learning. The marginal status of the sector is described by McIntyre in the following terms:

> *Adult community education is marginal in various ways: marginal to policy, marginal in resources allocated, and marginal in being run by a largely volunteer and female workforce* (McIntyre 1998, p.169).

McIntyre also concludes that the research evidence is against the view that adult community education, at least general adult education, is performing an important equity role (McIntyre 1998).

## Constraints

While national equity objectives exist for the adult community education sector, the national role is limited—with adult community education organised and funded on a State and user-pays basis. The Commonwealth provides some $750 000 for adult community education development through ANTA and the MCEETYA Task Force on Adult Community Education performs a useful national role, including monitoring progress in relation to the national policy. Overall, however, the Commonwealth role is limited, and adult community education development depends fundamentally on State and Territory action.

At the State/Territory level there is considerable diversity in the approach adopted to adult community education and this sector's role in equity strategies. Adult community education boards exist in Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia, and the Australian Capital Territory to provide for community input into the development of the system. In other States adult community education is linked to the administration of TAFE in various ways. In this situation, the extent to which equity is built into strategic planning varies between the States.

However, it is the normal practice for State adult community education boards to build equity objectives into their strategic planning. For example, the South Australian Adult Community Education Council, in its strategic plan for 1998–99, has identified strategies to enhance the responsiveness of adult community education to individuals and groups with special needs. Similar strategic planning exists in other States and Territories (see, for example, Adult Community and Further Education Board Victoria 1998; Adult and Community Education Board [NSW] 1997).

A basic constraint on the adult community education role in equity strategies resides in the fact that this sector functions as a user-pays system with policies for adult community education built around the full cost recovery principle. While governments support adult community education development in a number of ways, the bottom line is the user-pays principle.

Adult community education providers, however, seek special program funds and other competitive funds from a number of sources. It is common, for example, for programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, older people, people with disabilities, those with literacy difficulties, and other identified disadvantaged groups to be funded from these special program funds.

While this is a valuable source of provision this ad hoc approach impedes systematic strategic planning to develop the adult community education role in opening cross-sectoral pathways for disadvantaged individuals and groups and forging systemic links with the other sectors in such action.

## Second-chance education

Surveys in both Australia and Britain have shown that participation in adult community education is substantially conditioned by initial education, socio-economic status, and age (ABS 1996; Adult and Community Education Board [NSW] 1997). The majority of those participating are middle class, young, and with an extended initial education.

At the same time, adult community education experience with disadvantaged groups, usually under special program funding, has demonstrated the great potential of the sector in assisting disadvantaged individuals to gain confidence and self-esteem, a desire for learning, and in addressing specific needs such as literacy, basic computer skills, and other generic competencies. In these ways, adult community education can assist and support disadvantaged individuals in accessing education and training pathways and providing 'second-chance' education.

There is little doubt that, as policies for lifelong learning are developed in Australia, the adult community education role will become increasingly significant. The ongoing impact of modern information and communication technologies will enhance this role as more learning occurs in the home, in communities, and in the workplace.

Innovative strategies, such as the Learning City/learning community, will enhance the community role in lifelong learning. This is happening with Learning City developments in Britain and elsewhere (Department for Education and Employment [UK] 1998; OECD 1992).

There is, therefore, a need to ensure that the adult community education role is brought into planning for cross-sectoral strategies to address equity barriers. Innovative approaches to funding, such as the entitlement concept proposed by the UNESCO Delors Report (UNESCO 1996) could enhance the adult community education role in a more holistic and systemic approach to equity.

Local partnership development directed at access for all in a context of lifelong learning will clearly need to have adult community education as an active partner. An example of this development is to be found in the development of Wodonga as a Learning City (Kearns et al. 1999).

In summary, the transition to a learning society in Australia will require the redefinition and enhancement of the adult community education role. A broad spectrum of issues will need to be addressed in developing that role in the emerging context of lifelong learning. These include:

- the funding of adult community education in its provision for disadvantaged individuals and groups
- pathways between adult community education and other education and training sectors
- an increased use of modern technologies in the work of adult community education
- the role of adult community education in Learning City/learning community development

As the Victorian Adult Community and Further Education Board points out, adult community education has much to offer to national equity objectives in 'transforming lives: transforming communities' (Adult Community and Further Education Board Victoria 1997).

## Schools education

The policies, funding and strategies that constitute Commonwealth and State/Territory approaches to equity in schools over the last several years are characterised by strong statements in support of achieving, through education, a more equitable society. But, at the same time, there are continuing definitional and reporting problems, ideological differences, the vagaries of Commonwealth/State diplomacy and a lack of consistency over time. As a result, in explaining Commonwealth Government initiatives in literacy and numeracy and in supporting parental choice in schooling, the Commonwealth Minister for Employment, Education and Training, Dr Kemp, was able to claim that:

> *... when we came to office there'd been a program called the Disadvantaged Schools Program. That program, in the ten years before we came to office, had spent $1 billion in helping the so-called neediest pupils—the most educationally disadvantaged pupils and yet after 10 years and $1 billion 30% couldn't read and write adequately. In fact because of this failure many people are unemployed —because they have poor literacy and numeracy skills* (Kemp 1999).

### National initiatives

Australian education systems had not begun the decade with any strong statements on equity. In the 1989 declaration by Commonwealth and State Ministers, the *Common and agreed national*

*goals for schooling in Australia* (known as the Hobart Declaration) the only reference to equity concerns is in goal no.3:

> *To promote equality of education opportunities, and to provide for groups with special learning requirements* (MEETYA 1989).

In 1996 the following goal was added:

> *That every child leaving primary school should be able to read, write, spell and communicate at an appropriate level* (see MEETYA 1999c).

The overall theme of the 1996 statement is, however, summed up in the first goal:

> *To provide an excellent education for all young people, being one which develops their talents and capacities to full potential, and is relevant to the social, cultural and economic needs of the nation.*

The objectives (of which literacy was but one) and outcomes of the Disadvantaged Schools Program and other equity initiatives have of course been reviewed many times. In 1991, for example, in response to a request from the then Commonwealth Minister for Employment, Education and Training to advise on a 'broadbanded equity program for schools', the Schools Council set about preparing a model for the collection, analysis and reporting of the sorts of data on which plans to reduce educational disadvantage might be based.

The aim of the Schools Council project was:

> *... to help measure changes in what happens to disadvantaged young people as they seek to use our school systems, and to provide information in such a way as to help target intervention programs* (Teese et al. 1993, p.ix).

The report and the ensuing discussions with the States and Territories was followed by the introduction, in 1994, of the Commonwealth's National Equity Program for Schools (NEPS) and of the National Strategy for Equity in Schooling (NSES). It was agreed that the latter would be consistent with the 1998 *Common and agreed national goals for schooling in Australia* and would encompass all the various State and Territory equity programs, as well as the national equity programs.

Established on a triennial basis, the National Equity Program for Schools was a powerful instrument for the implementation of the equity policies of the Commonwealth Government, covering government and non-government schools. In the letter of transmittal the Commonwealth described the funding agreements under the program as covering the

> *... roles and responsibilities, objectives, priorities, and the use of funds under the NEPS as well as strategies for improved reporting on equity inputs and outcomes.*

There were seven target groups for the 1994–97 triennium:

- children and students with disabilities
- students at risk (of leaving school early)
- students from low socio-economic background or living in poverty
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- students from non-English-speaking backgrounds
- students who are geographically isolated
- disadvantaged gifted and talented students (that is, disadvantaged in one of the above ways)

The national strategy for equity in schooling adopted the first six of the seven categories while noting that the six groups are not mutually exclusive, specific strategies being required to help counter the cumulative effects on students' learning of multiple disadvantage. The strategy identified five priorities for action:

- curriculum and assessment
- teaching
- awareness and commitment among the education community

- supportive school environment
- optimal use of resources

As part of their commitment to the strategy, school authorities participate in annual reporting and monitoring of agreed performance measures. Summaries of these reports are presented in the annual *National report on schooling in Australia*, a publication prepared for the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (see MCEETYA 1998; 1999c).

Meanwhile the National Action Plan for the Education of Girls had commenced in 1993 to run until 1997 (based on the 1987 review of the National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools). The subsequent report of the MCEETYA Gender Equity Taskforce *Gender equity: A framework for Australian schools* identifies strategic areas and directions for action for understanding the process of construction of gender, curriculum, teaching and learning, violence and school culture, post-school pathways, and supporting change. The report provides a framework for systems and schools to report on school policies and practices in relation to these strategic directions.

When it adopted the national strategy, MCEETYA announced that it would conduct a mid-term review of the overall strategy in 1998, and would use available data, and if necessary would refine and refocus the strategy. A further review would be conducted in 2001. As at mid-1999 it appears that the mid-term review is yet to commence.

## Commonwealth initiatives

In the meantime the Commonwealth Government had been developing its literacy and numeracy policies, 'directed towards strengthening the literacy and numeracy achievements of all Australian school children' (DEETYA 1998). Key principles underpinning the policies were:

- better educational accountability through improved assessment and reporting
- parents to be fully informed about their children's education
- schools to focus on the needs of students
- students and their parents to have a choice of schools
- schools to focus on outcomes which prepare individuals for work and for longer-term learning
- all students to be given an equal opportunity to learn
- schools to have less regulation and greater autonomy
- schools to support quality teaching

The Commonwealth made it clear that targetted funding for equity programs would in future be tied to specific policy objectives:

> *The Commonwealth will continue to provide targetted funding for educationally disadvantaged students by supplementing the funding of Australian schools to achieve specific national objectives. The major factors which are usually seen as placing educational outcomes at risk include socio-economic disadvantage, poverty, low parental expectation, disability, language background other than English, family or personal difficulties, geographic isolation, Indigenous background and gender* (DEETYA 1998a).

A comparison with previous equity groupings shows a number of variations, such as the addition of 'low parental expectation' and 'family or personal difficulties'.

## The Adelaide declaration

In April 1999 MCEETYA endorsed the new *National goals for schooling in the twenty-first century*, to be known as the Adelaide Declaration, replacing the 1989 Hobart Declaration. Ministers agreed that the document would provide the framework for national reporting on

educational outcomes and that there would be six areas for initial outcomes reporting, namely:

- literacy
- numeracy
- student participation, retention and completion
- vocational education and training in schools
- science
- information technology

Civics and citizenship education and enterprise education were to follow.

Like the Commonwealth Literacy Policy, the 1999 declaration placed strong emphasis on performance measures, national targets or benchmarks and reporting on outcomes. Included in the declaration was a statement (rather than a commitment to ensuring as in the 1988 declaration) that schooling should be socially just, so that:

- Students' outcomes from schooling are free from the effects of negative forms of discrimination based on sex, language, culture and ethnicity, religion or disability; and of differences arising from students' socio-economic background or geographic location.
- The learning outcomes of educationally disadvantaged students improve and, over time, match those of other students.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have equitable access to, and opportunities in, schooling so that there learning outcomes improve and, over time, match those of other students.
- All students understand and acknowledge the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to Australian society and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to and benefit from, reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.
- All students understand and acknowledge the value of cultural and linguistic diversity, and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, such diversity in the Australian community and internationally.
- All students have access to the high-quality education necessary to enable the completion of school education to Year 12 or its vocational equivalent and that provides clear and recognised pathways to employment and further education and training.

This was certainly a much more comprehensive statement than had been included in the 1989 declaration.

## Equity redefined?

The current equity-related programs of the Commonwealth Government are, however, less clearly directed towards identified equity groups than hitherto and more defined in terms of developing the full potential of all students. Hence the objective of the 1998 Targetted Assistance Sub-Program is:

- to improve the quality of teaching and educational outcomes for all students, especially for those young people who are educationally disadvantaged
- to promote the study of other languages and cultures

- to improve literacy and numeracy standards for students
- to assist young people's transition from school to work

(DETYA 1998a)

As demonstrated in the Commonwealth's literacy program the approach is to set basic standards and hold schools accountable for seeing that students meet minimum standards. The Minister described this as:

> *... a matter of fundamental educational equity ... an historic breakthrough ... a huge change in the nature of educational accountability* (Kemp 1999).

This was a theme likely to find favour with the States as it reflected what had been introduced in 1996 when MCEETYA added the following goal to the Hobart Declaration:

> *That every child leaving primary school should be able to read, write, spell and communicate at an appropriate level.*

In 1997 this goal had been amended to include numeracy.

Thus in some respects the wheel had turned full circle, with the 1999 rhetoric of the Commonwealth Government bearing a strong resemblance to that of the Hobart Declaration of 1989. In 1999 there is a new emphasis on minimum standards with accompanying testing and reporting but there is less reference to the needs of identified equity groups than there has been through most of the 1990s.

## Higher education

This section reviews recent policy documents relating to the Commonwealth Government's equity policies in relation to higher education provision and then goes on to examine the auditing processes developed by universities in order to monitor equity strategies.

### 1998: The review of higher education financing and policy

The 1998 *Review of higher education financing and policy* (Commonwealth of Australia 1998) supported the development of a universally accessible post-secondary education system on the premise that such a system 'would have major intellectual, economic, social and cultural benefits for Australia'(p.51).The review committee emphasised:

> *... the continuing need to provide targetted support to those most in need: that is, those whose participation or success is restricted owing to their financial circumstances or social background* (p.51).

The review committee also noted the government's emphasis since the late 1980s on equity as a higher education policy objective:

> *One of the main aims of the equity framework [being] to ensure that students from all social groups have the opportunity to participate successfully in higher education, with the student population reflecting more closely the composition of society as a whole. Responsibility for pursuing national targets is vested in the universities. Institutions are required to include an equity plan in their educational profiles, and the funding they receive under the Higher Education Equity Program depends on assessment of those plans* (1998, p.91).

It noted that, while one of the strengths of Australia's higher education system is its accessibility, the report card on equity:

> *... is less impressive, particularly in relation to indigenous students, students from low socio-economic backgrounds and students from rural and remote areas. Individuals from these backgrounds continue to be under-represented in higher education, especially in certain courses. They are also less likely to complete secondary school, which limits their educational opportunities at post-secondary levels* (1998, p.136).

Arguing that a fundamental shift in the Government's approach to targetted support funding was desirable, the review committee proposed a funding framework that provided the opportunity to target support funding directly to individual students and that enabled individual students who are members of targetted equity groups to make choices about their own support requirements and preferences. The review committee sought:

> *... to move beyond a focus on equity groups and gross participation rates to concentrate on individuals. Difference need not be the same as inequality. Policies which focus on equal access will make a difference in the end only when individuals traditionally excluded from post-compulsory education are liberated to make an impact. The focus should be on individuality, not disability or handicap; on the need rather than the disability. Grouping people on the basis of disabilities, race, ethnicity or gender may be even further disabling* (1998, p.137).

The review committee went on to point out that, while it was clear that some groups had benefitted from the Government's equity initiatives in the past decade, some of the determinants of low participation by some groups lay outside the immediate control of the higher education system. Analysis suggested, for example, that the disproportionate level of students from lower SES backgrounds reflected differences in academic achievement and family attitudes rather than SES-related differences in the accessibility of higher education.

## 1999: Summative equity statement

The Commonwealth Government's *Equity in higher education* (DETYA 1999a) drew upon statistical returns to report performance for each institution and each of the following targetted equity group:

- people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent
- women (especially in non-traditional areas)
- people with disabilities
- people from rural and isolated backgrounds
- people from a non-English-speaking background who had arrived in Australia within the previous ten years
- people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds

Each institution was required to report against each of the equity performance indicators: access, participation, success, and retention (see DETYA 1999a, p.17 Appendix 1 for definitions).

The report expressed concern at the overall poor rates of:

- participation by people from rural, isolated and low socio-economic backgrounds
- retention of people from isolated backgrounds
- both success and retention by Indigenous people

It also commented on:

- the wide variability across institutions and regions in access rates for students from low socio-economic backgrounds or non-English-speaking backgrounds or with a disability
- the decline in participation since 1991 by people from rural, isolated and low socio-economic backgrounds
- the generally inverse relationship between Indigenous access and success/retention rates
- the rise in participation of women in non-traditional fields of study 1991–97, being close to or exceeding 40 per cent in all areas except engineering

The report provides time series data on access, participation, success and retention for each equity group where data are available for 1991–97. The report makes the following comments (page references refer to DETYA 1999a):

## Rural and isolated

The access of people from isolated backgrounds to higher education, at 1.92 per cent of commencing students, is very low compared to their population share of 4.5 per cent. Their success rate, at 95 per cent of the success rate of other students, is only marginally low, but their retention, at 90 per cent, is significantly low. This retention rate may well reflect the fact that four-fifths of students from isolated backgrounds study at urban universities and around one-third of students from isolated backgrounds study externally. The two-thirds of students from rural and isolated backgrounds who study on campus at urban universities are a long way from home and may experience the problems associated with this (such as homesickness, lack of contacts and support network, additional costs of living away from home), while those students who study externally tend to have the low retention rates associated with that mode of study (p.7).

## Low socio-economic status

Access to higher education by people from low socio-economic backgrounds remains very low. This is especially so for those aged 25 or more. There are huge variations from one university to the next in the proportion of students from this category. There is much more uniformity between institutions as far as success and retention relative to other students are concerned, with a very small range from the institutions with the highest and lowest results.

Overall, there is little difference between the success and retention rates of students from low socio-economic backgrounds and the rest of the student body. On a field of study basis, these students are over-represented in agriculture, education, engineering and nursing, and under-represented in the more prestigious areas of law, architecture, dentistry and medicine.

When level of course is examined, students in this category are severely under-represented in higher degree studies, both by research and by coursework. They are over-represented, however, in sub-degree and enabling courses (p.8).

## Indigenous students

The access rate of Indigenous people to higher education, at 1.5 per cent of commencing students, is now only slightly less than their population share of 1.7 per cent. However, their academic success and retention in higher education remain very low. The high attrition means that participation by Indigenous people in higher education overall is also low, at 65 per cent of what would be expected from this group's share of the general population (p.3).

One university—the University of South Australia—reported that they had found the predictors of success for Indigenous students included gender, enjoyment of university life, mode of study, family situation and whether students had been studying in the year before commencing their course. The highest incidence of attrition occurred among those Indigenous students who were male, lived alone, studied on campus (as opposed to external study), did not enjoy their studies and had not studied in the twelve months prior to commencing university (p.23)

The University of South Australia found that many Indigenous students came to university to meet the expectations of their communities. The desire on the part of the Indigenous students to meet such expectations was evidently insufficient to enable them to overcome their sudden exposure to the reality of university life and the discouragement many of them experience in their studies at the university (p.23).

## Non-English-speaking background

As a whole, members of this group have a slightly higher rate of access to higher education than the rest of the population. The group's success and retention are similar to those achieved by the rest of the student body.

Participation for this group is, however, very much dependent on location. Reflecting the distribution of the non-English-speaking population, urban universities in State capitals have much higher participation rates than regional universities and the retention rates of those students are virtually identical to those of all students. By contrast, the retention rates are relatively low at those regional universities with low numbers of non-English-speaking background students. The implication of this is that the relative size of the population of students from non-English-speaking backgrounds at an institution appears to have a bearing on their retention within the institution, at least within regional universities (p.4).

The executive summary of *Equity in higher education* concludes that:

> *... the success and retention rates of members of equity groups are, in general (excluding the Indigenous and isolated groups), on a par with, or only slightly below, those for other (non-equity group) students. This indicates that once members of those equity groups are in the university system they can, with appropriate support, achieve outcomes little different to those of the rest of the student body* (DETYA 1999a, p.viii).

## Institutional practices and system incentives

Universities' strategic plans for enhancing access, participation, success and retention by members of targetted equity groups are included annually in their triennium profiles negotiations documentation and in their quality assurance improvement plans. Copies of these are published (see for example, DETYA 1999b, 1999c) This level of reporting extends the transparency of institutional planning and support programs receiving Commonwealth government support.

Universities' programs for supporting access, participation, success and retention of Indigenous students were consolidated in *Indigenous education strategies of higher education institutions 1998–2000* (DETYA 1998c). This report reflects some of the diversity of approach in practices across universities generally.

Universities' practices for supporting access, participation, success and retention of students from low socio-economic backgrounds were also the subject of a report (Ramsay et al. 1998). This report paid particular attention to the University of South Australia's Special Access Scheme (USANET) which incorporates three components: outreach, access and support, while addressing the characteristics and outcomes of a number of similar schemes in a sample of other universities. As the report's executive summary indicates, while the particular educational support needs of students from low socio-economic backgrounds differ across regional and social groups and from student to student, institutional programs targetted to identifying and responding to those needs can indeed make a difference in individuals' access, participation, success and retention in higher education.

For many years universities have published in their handbooks and admissions materials details of their schemes for facilitating and supporting access for commencing students and support for progressing in their studies. These materials have been routinely reproduced, summarised, and incorporated into student support guides by school-based educational guidance services, by central admissions agencies and by private providers of information and educational/career counselling services.

## Entry, progression and outcomes for students

Issues associated with the processes by which students develop preferences for, apply for admission to, handle offers to enrol in, and undertake the first year of studies in higher education courses have been addressed in the past decade in a considerable number of studies (Pope et al. 1991; Pope & Cameron 1997; Cameron 1993; McClelland et al. 1993; TEPA 1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1996; Dobson & Sharma 1993; Dobson et al. 1996; McInnes & James 1995; DEET 1993; DETYA, 1999d; James et al. 1999a; ANOP Research Services 1994; Baldwin et al. 1991; Harvey-Beavis & Elsworth 1998; Hayden & Carpenter 1990).

A recent study by Urban et al. of completions by those commencing undergraduate courses in 1992 corroborates or extends a number of the findings referenced above, including:

> *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students had much lower completion rates than other domestic students…Students from non-English-speaking backgrounds had higher rates of completion than their English-speaking counterparts. Male students with a non-English-speaking background who enrolled on a basis other than TER [tertiary entrance rank] had substantially the same completion rates as their English speaking background counterparts. Socio-economic status exerts a positive influence on completion rates although it had only a marginal effect Women students from an isolated area had a lower completion rate than women who originated from an urban area. Geographic location, however, has no effect on the completion rates of men* (Urban et al. 1999, p.27).

This study also found that:

- Women are more likely to complete an award than men. This is particularly true for those who entered university on the basis of TER.
- Completions generally decline as age increases.
- Full-time students have the highest completion rate while external students have the lowest completion rate.
- TER is a significant predictor of completing a university course (but better in the middle range).
- For students who entered university on a basis other than a TER score those who have previous higher education experience and professional qualifications have the highest completion rates.
- Certain fields of study contribute, some positively (health, education, law, architecture and veterinary ) and some negatively (arts, science and engineering), to the probability of completion irrespective of the student characteristics.
- Compared to other domestic students, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have significantly lower completion rates.
- People with a non-English-speaking background have completion rates significantly higher than those with an English-speaking background.
- Socio-economic status affects completion rates but only marginally so.
- Students from isolated areas have significantly lower completion rates than urban students.

(Urban et al. 1999, p.1)

A number of other studies have had a more specific focus on the activities of members of particular equity groups or on the support services available to them (James et al. 1999b; Ham 1996; Anderson et al. 1998). An example is the recent James et al. study of rural and isolated school students and their higher education choices used variable descriptors that differed from those generally used. In their study they addressed the barriers perceived by students experiencing geographic (and associated socio-economic and technological) disadvantage.

## Equity and higher education: Where next?

In recent years, institutions plans for enhancing their equality of opportunity arrangements have been submitted to government as a requirement for continuing financial support, and a process of publishing the plans has commenced as part of the quality assurance and enhancement arrangements.

The comprehensive processes for reporting on equity matters in the higher education sector do not appear to be mirrored in the reporting procedures of the other education and training sectors. In part this no doubt reflects the sectors' different historical development and the different roles they each play in the overall provision of education and training. However, given the greater sophistication of the processes developed in the higher education sector it

might be helpful to use the higher education benchmarks as a basis for setting more comprehensive cross sectorial benchmarks.

# Cross-sectoral comparisons of access, participation and outcomes

In spite of high levels of public investment in education and training, members of specific social groups remain under-represented in terms of participation and achievement. This section reviews education and training outputs and outcomes across the sectors for the six identified groups targetted by the Commonwealth for equity funding. This review demonstrates that:

- Cross-sectoral analyses of equity outcomes are hampered by the lack of uniformity of data.
- While education and training outputs and outcomes for most targetted sub-groups have improved in absolute terms over the past decade, members of these social groups remain disadvantaged in relation to the rest of the population.
- Not all members of a particular target group are equally disadvantaged.
- Membership of more that one equity target group has been shown to significantly compound the educational disadvantages faced by individuals.
- Low socio-economic status is a significant sub-category associated with poor educational outcomes within all target groups.
- As low skills and unemployment are now linked to labour market disadvantage, these categories should be recognised as equity target groups.
- A low level of educational attainment is a significant predictor of poor participation and achievement in post-school education and training, including participation in adult community education.
- A low level of educational attainment is also associated with low socio-economic status.
- Governments need to facilitate genuine pathways between education and employment for the most disadvantaged members of targetted equity groups, such as those with low skills who are long-term unemployed.

Given all of the above, one policy direction governments could take would be to target equity services to individuals of low socio-economic status within all target groups.

In addition, given that low skills and unemployment are linked with low participation and attainment at the school level, students at risk of failing to satisfactorily complete secondary school should be targetted as a specific equity group and assistance should be more comprehensive, particularly in terms of linking education and training to genuine employment outcomes.

## Measuring equity outcomes

It has always been difficult to measure the educational outcomes of equity programs, especially if the goals of such programs are indirect or long-term. While some equity programs have specific measurable short-term objectives, such as literacy competence, they may also have long-term objectives, such as increasing Year 12 completion and raising

achievement. It would, however, be impossible to prove a causal link between a low socio-economic student's successful completion of Year 12 and his or her participation in an equity program during primary school. Measuring the outcomes of equity programs will always be problematic given the complexity of the education production function.

Equity programs in education and training face the problem of trying to modify the impact of multiple systemic barriers to participation and attainment among target groups. For example, an equity program that aimed to increase access and retention in vocational education and training courses could be judged successful if it achieved those policy goals. But the barriers faced by members of particular groups may not be confined to the area of access and participation. If the curriculum and teaching style of the institution is not sensitive to the needs of the target group (for example, in terms of language and culture) the individuals may participate in greater numbers but not show any improvement in the rates of educational attainment.

Institutions are now expected to address teaching and learning practices in their equity programs by adopting a more inclusive culture of teaching, learning and curriculum (NBEET 1996, p.9). However, even if rates of educational attainment are addressed by the educational institution, the course graduates may still face barriers to employment from discrimination in the workplace. Governments therefore need to look at ways to facilitate genuine pathways to employment for the most disadvantaged members of targetted equity groups who participate in education and training.

## Impact of education and training on specific groups

The impact of education and training on specific equity groups can be examined by comparing their outputs and outcomes in relation to the rest of the population. The following analysis is based on data published by each of the education and training sectors. The conclusions represent a first step towards a cross-sectoral analysis of equity outcomes in education and training. As sector-based data collections are of limited use when making cross-sectoral comparisons, the conclusions are indicative rather than definitive. The definition of some equity groups differs slightly between the sectors.

The scope of the sector-specific data collections is limited and there are variations in the years for which data are reported. Nevertheless there is sufficient similarity in reporting of outputs and outcomes to make observations about the condition of equity groups in more than one sector. Published data collections are a key instrument for monitoring performance in education and training, so it is important to use these sources with the expectation that any deficiencies identified may be addressed as the collections are refined and improved over time.

Table 2 provides participation data for most equity groups in each sector of education and training in 1996. Participation statistics are illustrated, because at this level, it is possible to obtain data in relation to most equity groups. However participation data is not a good source of performance information because it does not indicate educational and employment outcomes. To monitor equity outcomes, we need data on retention, course completion and employment for disadvantaged groups. The quality of such data varies considerably between the sectors, as illustrated in the discussion below.

The following section discusses the outputs and outcomes for one social group—Indigenous Australians. Issues specific to the remaining five social groups are discussed in the subsequent sections. We focus primarily on one social group because we found that the relative educational outputs and outcomes for all target groups tend to follow similar patterns. Indigenous Australians were chosen for the detailed analysis because:

- Indigenous Australians are an equity target group in the four sectors of schools, vocational education and training, higher education and adult community education.
- Comprehensive data sets are published in relation to Indigenous education and training outcomes in most sectors (including, for example, a unique cross-sectoral and

longitudinal analysis of Indigenous education and training outcomes by Robinson and Bamblett 1998).

**Table 2: Student participation by sector, 1996**

| | Schools (Years 11&12) | Vocational education and training | Higher education | Adult community education |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| All students | 3 143 015 (371 333) | 1 391 000 | 658 827 | 379 700 |
| Indigenous Australians | 2.9% | 1.7% | 1.7% | 0.5% |
| People with a disability | n.a | 3.5% | 2.4% | 2.1% |
| Low SES | n.a | n.a | 14% | n.a |
| Females | 49% (52%) | 46% | 54% | 74% |
| Rural | n.a | 29% | 18.3% | 28% |
| Isolated | n.a | 3.5% | 1.9% | 1.6% |
| NESB | n.a | 12.9% | 5.2% | 1.7% (Vic) |
| Low skills | n.a | n.a | n.a | n.a |
| Unemployed | n.a | 20% | n.a | 7% |
| Not in labour force | n.a | 13% | n.a | 19% |

Sources: ABS 1996; MCEETYA 1999c; NCVER 1999c; DETYA 1999b; Adult Community and Further Education Board Victoria 1998

Notes: ACE participation refers to personal enrichment programs reported in the NCVER collection for 1997. Higher education statistics relate to 1997.

## Equity outcomes for Indigenous Australians

Participation patterns for Indigenous students reflect the hierarchy of the education and training system, with the highest rate of Indigenous participation in the vocational education and training sector and the lowest in higher education. At the time of the 1996 census, Indigenous Australians comprised 1.7 per cent of the 15–64-year-old population. They also comprised 2.4 per cent of all students undertaking vocational education and training courses, and 1.7 per cent of students in higher education (NCVER 1996; DETYA 1999a).

Between 1986 and 1996, Indigenous participation rates increased in all sectors for which data are available. In secondary schooling, Indigenous participation increased from 1.5 per cent of all students in 1986 to over 2 per cent in 1996. Indigenous participation in VET increased from less than 0.5 per cent in 1986 to 2.5 per cent in 1996 and in higher education, Indigneous students were 0.2 per cent of all students in 1983 and over one per cent in 1997 (Robinson & Bamblett 1998).

In Victoria, where 0.4 per cent of the adult population is Indigenous, 0.5 per cent of participants in adult community education were Indigenous students in 1998 (ACFE 1998).

### Access, retention and completion

The relationship between access, retention and completion rates for Indigenous students differs in the vocational education and training and higher education sectors. Indigenous students have high rates of access to vocational education and training (relative to their share of the 15–64-year-old population) and a high retention rate relative to other students (0.94 against a reference value of 1)(see table 3). While retention rates are high, the pass rate of

Indigenous students is three-quarters the rate for non-Indigenous students (0.73 against a reference value of 1).

In higher education, Indigenous students have a reasonable rate of access (the same as their share of the adult population) but a lower retention rate than in vocational education and training (0.78 against a reference value of 1). The pass rate of Indigenous students in higher education is slightly higher than Indigenous students in vocational education and training but still much lower than the non-Indigenous university student population (0.78 against a reference value of 1).

**Table 3: Retention rate for Indigenous students in secondary schooling, VET and higher education compared to non-Indigenous students 1996 (against a value of 1)**

| Secondary schooling | Vocational education and training | Higher education |
|---|---|---|
| 0.43 | 0.94 | 0.78 |

Sources: DETYA 1999a; NCVER 1998b; MCEETYA 1998.

Notes: The retention rate refers to the completion of Year 12 in secondary schooling, module completion in VET and course completion in higher education.

The Year 12 retention rate for Indigenous students in secondary school is only 31 per cent (0.43 against a reference value of 1) so the Indigenous students who are successful in gaining access to university courses are more highly selected from their own population than non-Indigenous students.

Nevertheless, the attrition rate for Indigenous students remains higher than for the rest of the university population implying the existence of institutional barriers to participation and completion.

Although school attendance is compulsory until 15 years of age, it is suspected that the attendance rates of Indigenous students are lower than those of non-Indigenous students. DETYA is currently undertaking a study of school attendance levels among Indigenous students that aims to collect available data on Indigenous attendance patterns by gender and locality.

## Course type

Given the low rate of Year 12 completion among Indigenous students, it is not surprising that high proportions of Indigenous students in vocational education and training and higher education are in preparatory courses. In vocational education and training, 47 per cent of Indigenous students are in the preparatory stream, compared to 25 per cent of non-Indigenous students. In higher education, 30 per cent of Indigenous students are in enabling courses, compared to 1 per cent of non-Indigenous students.

A higher proportion of Indigenous students in vocational education and training transferred to further education and training (45% compared to 39% of non-Indigenous students). However transferring Indigenous students were more likely to remain in the vocational education and training sector (74% compared to 68% of non-Indigenous transfers) than to proceed to a higher education course (16% compared to 23% of non-Indigenous transfers).

## Employment pathways

The labour market outcomes for Indigenous students who complete vocational and training courses are less favourable than for non-Indigenous students. In 1998, 49 per cent of Indigenous graduates were employed compared to 73 per cent of non-Indigenous graduates.

Twenty-two per cent of Indigenous graduates were unemployed, compared to 14 per cent of non-Indigenous graduates (see table 4).

The employment outcomes for equity groups in higher education courses are not published by the Graduate Careers Council of Australia (GCCA) which conducts the *Graduate destinations survey* on behalf of the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee. The GCCA collects the data on equity groups but does not publish it except for a breakdown between males and females (GCCA 1999). Although the data can be purchased from the GCCA, the absence of published data diminishes the accountability of the higher education sector in terms of monitoring the employment outcomes of social groups.

**Table 4: Labour force status as at 29 May 1998 of TAFE graduates by social group (ATSI, NESB and disability).**

| | Employed | | | Unemployed | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Full-time | Part-time | Total (a) | Looking for full-time work | Looking for part-time work | Total (a) | Not in labour force | Total % (a) | Total graduates |
| | | | | *(row percentages)* | | | | | *(number)* |
| ATSI | 29.0 | 15.6 | 48.9 | 14.6 | 7.6 | 22.2 | 28.3 | 100.0 | 1002 |
| Non-ATSI | 48.2 | 19.4 | 73.1 | 9.4 | 4.5 | 13.9 | 12.8 | 100.0 | 65508 |
| NESB | 39.9 | 17.0 | 61.9 | 12.9 | 6.3 | 19.1 | 18.6 | 100.0 | 20783 |
| ESB | 51.5 | 20.5 | 77.7 | 7.9 | 3.7 | 11.7 | 10.4 | 100.0 | 45776 |
| Disability | 29.6 | 17.3 | 51.5 | 14.2 | 8.2 | 22.4 | 25.8 | 100.0 | 4018 |
| No Disability | 49.1 | 19.5 | 74.2 | 9.2 | 4.2 | 13.4 | 12.2 | 100.0 | 61322 |

(a) Total includes 'not stated'

Source: NCVER 1999b, p.10

An economic study of the private returns to education for Indigenous Australians found that Indigenous male and female graduates who completed post-secondary qualifications obtained a relatively high financial return on their participation in education. However the authors also found that Indigenous students who completed Year 12 had a lower than average return on their additional years of schooling (Daly & Lin 1997). This finding further illustrates the inadequacy of Year 12 retention as an indicator of educational outcomes from schooling. Subject participation and achievement need to be reported for Year 12 students by social group before we can monitor the outcomes of secondary school students.

In summary, over the past two decades there have been substantial improvements in the outcomes of Indigenous students in the education and training system. From a very low base in the 1970s, the participation rates of Indigenous students have improved in all sectors of education and training (Robinson & Bamblett 1998).

However as the number of higher education students doubled between 1988 and 1998 (DETYA 1998b), the participation and success rates of non-Indigenous people have also increased. Relative to other students, the educational outcomes of Indigenous students remain significantly poorer than the rest of the population.

## Equity outcomes for other target groups

The patterns of access, participation and outcomes for other sub-groups of the population follow a similar pattern to the education and training outcomes of Indigenous students. Issues specific to each group are identified below.

## Students with a disability

A key problem in comparing educational outcomes for students with a disability is the range of disabilities within the population sub-group and the impact of those disabilities on educational attainment. For example, the data collections do not differentiate between students with a physical and intellectual disability.

There are also ethical issues involved in asking students to self-identify as having a disability and it is likely that the category is under-reported (ANTA 1998b, p.13). There are insufficient published data available on students with a disability in schooling or adult community education to make observations about these sectors.

Students with a disability are more likely to be engaged in lower-level courses, have higher withdrawal rates and lower rates of completion in vocational education and training (NCVER 1996).

Although students with a disability are under-represented in higher education, their retention rates and completion rates are comparable with the rest of the student population (DETYA 1999a).

## Students from low socio-economic backgrounds

Socio-economic status (SES) has a significant effect on participation and achievement in senior secondary schooling, higher education and adult community education (NBEET 1996; DETYA 1999a). The educational participation rate of low-SES students deteriorates between schools and higher education. The Year 12 completion rate for low-SES students is 0.75 the rate of high-SES students, whereas in higher education, the participation of low-SES students in 0.42 of high-SES students.

Although 57 per cent of low-SES students are retained to Year 12, they appear to lack either the motivation or the marks to gain admission to university. This illustrates the inadequacy of Year 12 retention as an indicator of educational outcomes. Year 12 retention is an indicator of participation (output) rather than educational outcomes because it does not reflect subject participation or student achievement—both of which influence post-school education and employment (Ball & Lamb 1999; Teese et al. 1995). Once admitted to university, the retention rate of the low-SES students is barely different from the student population as a whole.

**Table 5: Year 12 retention and higher education participation rates of low-SES students, 1996**

| Schools (Year 12 retention) | | Higher education (participation) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Low-SES | High-SES | Low-SES | | High-SES | |
| | | Under 25 years | Over 25 years | Under 25 years | Over 25 years |
| 0.75 | 1 | 0.42 | 0.35 | 1 | 1 |

Sources: DETYA 1999a; Commonwealth of Australia 1998 (West Report)

In vocational education and training low-SES students are more likely to have higher levels of participation in TAFE than high-SES students (Ainley & Long 1998, p.390). As ANTA does not recognise low-SES as an equity group, no national figures are available.

In adult community education, participation increases with socio-economic decile. In 1995, people in the second highest SES decile participated in adult community education at more than twice the rate of people in the second lowest decile. Participation also increases with level of formal education (AAACE 1995).

In all sectors low socio-economic status appears to cut across each equity category, particularly Indigenous Australians and rural and isolated students. As the Higher Education Council noted,

> *... in 1995, the under-represented indigenous and rural and isolated groups are dominated by low socio-economic students, while for women and NESB students, the problem of participation more closely resembles the biased socio-economic distribution of the total student population. This leads to a conclusion that socio-economic status is a dominant factor in predicting students' likelihood of participating in higher education* (NBEET 1996, p.63).

People of low socio-economic background are commonly identified by the postcode of their home address in the data collections for higher education and schools. This proxy indicator is of limited use for identifying the socio-economic status of individual students because of the variations in socio-economic status within postcode regions. As the Higher Education Council noted:

> *... while low SES may indeed be the major factor, identification of this characteristic remains one of the more contentious aspects of the definitional and indicator work currently being trialed in the sector* (NBEET 1996, p.63).

Recognising the problems associated with using postcodes as an SES indicator, a recent study commissioned by DETYA recommended that socio-economic status be identified through individual-based measures of the occupation and education of parents at the time when the student is in high school. The authors found that these characteristics were sufficient to represent the family socio-economic situation while the student was completing their secondary schooling (Western et al. 1993). Such a measure, if adopted in all sectors, would produce a substantial improvement in the quality and comparability of data available on equity target groups in post-compulsory education and training.

## Women and girls

Women are more likely to participate in post-compulsory education and training in all sectors except vocational education and training, where female enrolments are slightly below male enrolment levels. Women comprise three-quarters of total participants in adult community education (Adult Community and Further Education Board Victoria 1998). Women outnumber men in university enrolments and female secondary students are more likely to complete Year 12.

In schools, young women complete Year 12 at a higher rate than young men but are under-represented in higher level maths and sciences. This limits their options for post-school education and employment (MCEETYA 1998). Young women from high-SES backgrounds are more likely to be enrolled in higher-level maths and sciences than those from low-SES backgrounds. At the same time, young men from low-SES backgrounds are over-represented in traditionally 'male' subject areas and experience relatively low levels of achievement (Teese et al. 1995).

In higher education, while women outnumber men overall, they are under-represented in agriculture, architecture, engineering, business/economics and science courses, and in higher degree programs (DETYA 1999a). After graduation women are:

- less likely to be in full-time employment: of those available for full-time employment after graduating from universities, females (78 per cent) were less likely than males (80 per cent) to be in full-time employment
- less likely to be employed in the private sector: only 38 per cent of female graduates are employed in the private sector, compared to 61 per cent of male graduates
- more likely to be employed in the health industry (30 per cent compared to 11 per cent of males), and in the education industry (19 per cent compared to 9 per cent of males).

(GCCA 1999, pp.18–19).

The Graduate Careers Council of Australia attributes the different destinations profile of female and male graduates to differences in fields of study:

> *... in terms of survey responses, social work, education (post-initial education), nursing (initial and post-initial education), and rehabilitation studies all had proportions of females at eighty per cent or more. At the other end of the scale, most areas of engineering (chemical and 'other' being the exceptions) and surveying, had proportions of male respondents in excess of eighty per cent* (GCCA 1999, p.19).

In terms of salaries, participation in higher education bestows significant advantages on female graduates compared to other women, although female graduates' wages are slightly below male graduates' wages. In 1998, the median graduate starting salary for females with bachelors degrees ($30 000) was lower than for males ($31 000).

Nevertheless, female university graduates earn salaries that are higher than both the annual median salary for females aged 20–24 ($26 000) and the annual rate of average weekly earnings for females of all ages ($24 400). By contrast, the median starting salary for male graduates is higher than the annual median salary for males aged 20–24 ($26 000) but lower than average weekly earnings for males of all ages ($37 200) (ABS 1998; GCCA 1999, p.23).

In vocational education and training, female students are under-represented in non-traditional areas and in apprenticeships. Female students account for less than 8 per cent of enrolments in trade certificates and women are more likely to enrol in non-award courses than males (ANTA 1998a, p.12).

While roughly equal numbers of women and men participate in TAFE courses, 24 per cent of males are enrolled in the fields of engineering/surveying compared to 3 per cent of females. The highest proportion of females (26 per cent) are enrolled in business/administration/economics and in VET multi-field education (22 per cent). This field has the poorest labour market outcomes (NCVER 1999a, p.33; NCVER 1999b, p.11; Ryan 2000).

In 1998, 79 per cent of male TAFE graduates were employed after their course, compared to 67 per cent of female TAFE graduates. However, male graduates were almost twice as likely as females to be employed full-time (64 per cent compared to 35 per cent of females). Thirty-two per cent of female TAFE graduates were unemployed or not in the labour force compared with 20 per cent of male TAFE graduates (NCVER 1999b, p.10).

The prior employment status of the TAFE student has a significant effect on his or her likelihood of being employed after completing a course. In 1998 ninety-one per cent of those employed prior to their course were employed after graduation, compared to 46 per cent of those who had been unemployed before their course. Of those unemployed prior to their course, 42 per cent of women TAFE graduates found employment compared to 52 per cent of male TAFE graduates (NCVER 1999b, pp.121–23).

The average weekly earnings of female TAFE graduates working full-time were significantly lower than the earnings of male graduates in full-time work. As can be seen in table 6, the disparity in earnings persists in almost every level of qualification and regardless of field of study. For example, the weekly wage of graduates with diplomas working full-time is $735 for males and $509 for females. Women with trade certificates earn, on average, $443 per week compared to $521 for males. It is only at AQF certificate level 1, that female graduates earn more ($403 per week) than male graduates ($381 per week) in full-time employment. In all fields of study, female graduates working full-time earn less than male graduates in the same field (NCVER 1999b, p.150).

In summary, the main equity issue for women in post-compulsory education and training is that women graduates have poorer employment outcomes than men. Women are less likely to be employed full-time upon graduation and their wages are lower than men with comparable qualifications. Women graduates of both vocational education and higher education courses also experience lower incomes than male graduates. The persistence of poor wage outcomes for female graduates relative to male graduates in all sectors could be related to female

students' chosen fields of study, but is also likely to be evidence of persistent structural discrimination in the labour market.

**Table 6: Average weekly earnings of male and female TAFE graduates employed full-time at 29 May 1998, by level of qualification.**

| | Average weekly earnings ($) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Level of qualification | Males | Females | *Difference (%)* | |
| Diploma | 735 | 509 | *-226* | *(-31)* |
| Associate diploma | 711 | 549 | *-161* | *(-23)* |
| Advanced certificate—post-trade | 736 | 491 | *-245* | *(-33)* |
| Advanced certificate—other | 765 | 577 | *-188* | *(-25)* |
| Certificate—trade | 521 | 443 | *-78* | *(-15)* |
| Certificate—other | 569 | 500 | *-69* | *(-12)* |
| AQF—advanced diploma | 656 | 579 | *-77* | *(-12)* |
| AQF—diploma | 730 | 530 | *-200* | *(-27)* |
| AQF—certificate IV | 784 | 633 | *-151* | *(-19)* |
| AQF—certificate III | 576 | 481 | *-95* | *(-16)* |
| AQF—certificate II | 469 | 463 | *-6* | *(-1)* |
| AQF—certificate I | 381 | 403 | *22* | *(+6)* |

Source: NCVER 1999b.

## Rural and isolated students

People from rural and isolated backgrounds are disadvantaged in terms of education and training outcomes in all sectors compared with urban dwellers, with the highest level of disadvantage being suffered by isolated students. However access to vocational education and training is not an equity issue for rural and isolated students. The participation rate of rural and isolated students in vocational education and training is higher than for urban students.

Data on educational outcomes for rural and isolated students tend to reflect multiple group disadvantage, as rural dwellers are more likely to be from low socio-economic backgrounds and high proportions of isolated students are Indigenous Australians. There are little data on the participation of rural and isolated students in adult community education, and provision in this sector tends to be concentrated in urban areas (AAACE 1995)

People from rural and isolated backgrounds are less likely to complete Year 12 than other students. In 1996, 60 per cent of rural students and 51 per cent of isolated students completed Year 12 compared to 68 per cent of all secondary students. Little information is available about other aspects of their school experience. In most States and Territories, rural and isolated students report lower levels of student performance in basic skills tests and Year 12 achievement (MCEETYA 1998, p.63).

People from rural and isolated backgrounds have lower rates of access to higher education compared to their population share. Eighteen per cent of rural students enrol in universities although they comprise 24 per cent of the population. Two per cent of isolated students enrol in universities although they comprise 4.5 per cent of the population. The participation rate of rural students in higher education is 72 per cent the rate of urban dwellers and isolated students participate at 39 per cent the rate of urban students. In terms of access and participation, students from isolated areas are the most disadvantaged group in higher education and their relative situation has worsened since 1996 (DETYA 1999a, p.33). The success rate of rural and isolated students is comparable to all students but the retention rate of isolated students is 90 per cent that of other students. This is attributed to the distance from

home suffered by isolated students studying on campus and the high proportion of isolated students undertaking external studies.

On the other hand, people from rural and isolated areas have higher participation rates in vocational education and training (8 per cent) than the rates for urban dwellers and the population as a whole (7 per cent). However it is likely that the range of training options and the employment outcomes of rural and isolated students are more limited than those for urban graduates (ANTA 1998a, pp.15, 25).

The small proportion of the population identifying as rural and isolated creates some problems for monitoring education and employment outcomes for this group, especially for isolated students. In addition, the use of postcodes to identify students as rural and isolated is inadequate for measuring geographical disadvantage because it does not indicate distance from an educational institution. Western et al. (1998) recommended that the postcode measures of rural and isolated be replaced by a measure that classifies students according to the distance from their permanent home address to the location of their nearest educational institution. Such a measure, if applied to all sectors, would improve the quality and comparability of data on educational participation among rural and isolated students. The refinement of the measure of socio-economic status recommended by Western et al.would also ensure that the most economically disadvantaged in the rural and isolated populations were identified in statistical collections.

## Students of non-English-speaking backgrounds

Students from non-English-speaking backgrounds are under-represented in vocational education and training and adult community education, but over-represented in higher education compared to people of English-speaking background (Ainley & Long 1998, p.390). Over 5 per cent of higher education students are from non-English-speaking backgrounds, compared to 4.8 per cent of the general population. The participation and retention rates for NESB students in higher education are higher than the rates for students from English-speaking backgrounds, and their success rate is about the same (DETYA 1999a, p.25).

Of all the target groups, NESB is a group with large intra-group differences in terms of educational outcomes. As the higher education data do not provide details of NESB students by sub-group, it is not possible to explore intra-group variations in educational and employment outcomes for that sector. However, NCVER publish useful data on NESB sub-groups in vocational education and training. Non-English-speaking background students who are over-represented in vocational education and training compared to their position in the total population are from Arabic, Chinese, Vietnamese, Spanish and Slavic language groups. By comparison, students from Greek and Italian backgrounds are under-represented in vocational education and training (NCVER 1999a, p.26).

Non-English-speaking background is too broad a category to be useful in identifying disadvantaged students in any sector of education and training. For example, groups as different as second-generation European migrants and recently arrived refugees do not suffer similar types of educational disadvantage. The extent of diversity within the NESB category suggests that a major redefinition of NESB as an equity group is needed, or that NESB should be replaced by more relevant categories of disadvantage. One option could be to report participation and outcomes for sub-categories of NESB students such as date of arrival or proficiency in English. As a minimum, the language or country of origin of NESB students should be reported in the data collections, as NCVER already reports statistics for this group in vocational education and training. Characteristics such as low-SES, low skills, or unemployment, could also be used to identify sub-groups within NESB who are most disadvantaged in the post-compulsory education and training system.

## Disadvantage of multiple group membership

Membership of more than one equity target group is likely to compound the educational disadvantage faced by individuals. Golding and Volkoff analysed employment outcomes for vocational education and training students within seven sub-groups:

- Indigenous
- with a disability
- unemployed
- low skills
- NESB
- rural
- women

They found a positive relationship between the percentage of graduates who were not working and membership of more than one sub-group, as follows:

- Only ten per cent of individuals who were members of one target group were not working after graduation.
- Graduate unemployment rose to 40 per cent of individuals who were members of two target groups.
- Fifty per cent of members of three target groups, and 55 per cent of individuals who were members of four target groups were unemployed.
- Eighty-five per cent of individuals who were members of five or more target groups were not working after completion of their course.

(Golding & Volkoff 1998b, p.11)

This reinforces the need to target equity services to individuals who are members of more than one equity group, and to sub-groups within the defined equity categories.

## Issues common to all sectors

While education and training outputs and outcomes for most targetted sub-groups have improved in absolute terms over the past decade, members of these social groups remain disadvantaged in relation to the rest of the population. For example, Year 12 completion rates for low-SES students have risen from below 50 per cent in 1987 to about 57 per cent in 1996. Over the same period, the Year 12 completion rate for high-SES students has increased from 67 percent to 75 per cent (Commonwealth of Australia 1998, p.93). Thus, in spite of an improvement in Year 12 completion among low-SES students, the gap in completion rates between students from high-SES and low-SES groups remains the same. The trend towards rising levels of participation in all the sectors has overshadowed improvements in outcomes for specific groups, who remain under-represented in relation to the rest of the population.

Equity groups appear to participate in more in education and training institutions that are 'decentralised' in terms of service delivery. For example, people from rural and isolated areas have higher participation rates in vocational education and training (8 per cent) than the rates for urban dwellers and the population as a whole (7 per cent). The participation rates for Indigenous students and low-SES students in regional universities are higher than in city universities. On the other hand, there appears to be a negative relationship between access and outcomes for target groups. For example, the three universities that have the highest rates of access for Indigenous students all have very low retention and success rates. By contrast, the universities that have lowest rates of access for Indigenous students have the highest rates of success. These issues are beyond the scope of this paper and require further research.

The existence of intra-group differences within sub-populations limits the value of reviews of education and training outcomes for specific social groups. Within the target groups there are

sub-groups of students who have no difficulty succeeding in the education and training system. These students are likely to come from higher socio-economic backgrounds or possess exceptional academic abilities that enable them to overcome many of the economic, social and cultural factors that serve to disadvantage other members of their social group. To address this problem equity policies and programs could be more tightly targetted to the members of groups most in need of assistance.

## Improving targetting within social groups

There is a rationale for continuing to target equity policies and programs to specific groups. As many social groups suffer common barriers to educational participation and attainment, it is efficient for institutions and systems to address these barriers in a uniform way.

However it is not necessary to offer equity programs and support services to individuals who do not suffer the same degree of disadvantage as other group members.

Low socio-economic status is a significant sub-category associated with poor educational outcomes within all target groups. A low level of educational attainment (in other words, low skills) is a significant predictor of achievement in higher education and is also associated with low-SES. If governments want to define sub-categories within social groups which are most in need of equity services, they should target sub-groups from low socio-economic backgrounds, have low skills, or are unemployed. As there is a high correlation between these three categories of disadvantage, these sub-groups could be targetted in all sectors, as appropriate. For example, while the category of unemployment is irrelevant for policy purposes in schooling, low-SES and low achievement would be sufficient to identify disadvantaged students in secondary schooling within all the equity groups.

For policy development and accountability purposes, the measurement of low socio-economic status should be improved. The use of postcodes as an indicator of low-SES is inadequate for identifying individual students in need of equity assistance. To ask students to identify levels of family income would be highly intrusive and inappropriate at the institutional level. A less intrusive means of identifying low-SES students would be to identify their parents' highest level of educational attainment and occupation, as recommended by Western et al. (1998).

Western et al. found that occupation and education form the key dimensions of socio-economic status that impact on an individual's ability to participate in higher education. They argued that the collection of information on individual student characteristics and their households was the most effective way to identify socio-economically disadvantaged students for targetted equity initiatives, rather than relying on surrogate measures of socio-economic status derived from area-based measures (Western et al. 1998, p.17). This measure would provide a vastly improved means of targeting equity services and of monitoring educational outcomes for disadvantaged students.

## New target groups

Two new factors now appear to be linked with labour market disadvantage—*low skills* and *unemployment*.

The importance of education and training to the economy and society has increased in recent years in the wake of structural changes to the labour market. The disappearance of unskilled jobs over the last two decades has meant that educational attainment is increasingly important to obtaining jobs and remaining in steady lifetime employment. Below-average school attainment now has a strong relationship to a person's likelihood of being unemployed when they leave school (Marks & Fleming 1998, p.8). The 'deepening divide' between those who are involved in and those who are marginal to education and training places an estimated 300 000 young adults at risk of labour market disadvantage (Spierings 1999, p.10).

Unemployment has a significant impact on a person's capacity to find work after completing a course of education or training. The employment rate of vocational education and training graduates who were unemployed prior to commencing a course is half the employment rate of graduates who held jobs when they commenced their courses. Only forty-six per cent of graduates who were unemployed before the commencement of their course were successful in gaining employment the following year, compared to 88 per cent of those who were employed before the start of their course (NCVER 1999a, p.15).

The labour market disadvantage faced by vocational education and training graduates who are members of targetted social groups is compounded by unemployment status and low skills. Golding and Volkoff (1998b) found that members of target groups who were long-term unemployed had worse employment outcomes after graduation than members of social groups who were employed or not in the labour force. Members of target groups who had low skills were even **less** likely to obtain work on completion than members of target social groups who were long-term unemployed. The capacity to learn new skills appears to be more important in achieving labour market success than any other factor associated with group disadvantage, including unemployment.

Unemployment and low skills are not completely adequate for identifying disadvantaged students because they are educational outcomes as well as input characteristics. The point of defining equity groups in terms of input characteristics is to try to help those most at risk of experiencing poor educational outcomes, before the poor outcomes eventuate. The category of unemployment is also not useful at the school level, and given the parlous state of data collections on school education outcomes, it will be a long time before school education authorities report information on student achievement in a meaningful way. An alternative is to target low-SES students within all equity categories as a means of identifying students at risk of educational disadvantage after Year 10.

The increasing level of disadvantage associated with low skills and unemployment indicates the significance of lifelong learning as an educational outcome for all students. While equity strategies should be focussed more on the individuals most in need within equity groups, the services provided need to be more comprehensive in scope and integrated with genuine pathways to employment. Some strategies for pursuing these objectives are discussed in the following chapter.

# Local partnerships for equity

This section draws on international developments to discuss the case for rethinking equity objectives and strategies on the basis of cross-sectoral collaboration at the local level.

In a context of lifelong learning, the issues of cross-sectoral collaboration in pursuit of equity objectives is inevitably linked to the question of partnership between the education sectors and a wider spectrum of community partners, with much learning occurring in social contexts outside of education institutions..

There is a strong case for an experiment with pilot projects in Australia, in a wide range of contexts, to test the value of local partnerships as an equity strategy. Cross-sectoral collaboration between the education sectors would be a key component of local partnerships.

An important goal of local partnerships would be to provide genuine pathways to employment for the educationally disadvantaged. Strengthening local partnerships as an equity strategy would require consideration of the funding implications, including the funding of the adult community education sector in its equity/pathways and 'second chance' roles. British innovations such as the development of Learning Cities are examined and a case put for similar pilot projects to be developed in Australia.

Innovative funding concepts, such as the entitlement scheme proposed by Jacques Delors in the report of the UNESCO Commission on Education for the 21st Century could be useful policy instruments in, for example, encouraging disadvantaged early school leavers to return to education.

## Shifting context for access and equity

Access and equity policies in post-compulsory education and training over the past decade have been developed and implemented in a socio-economic context that has become increasingly difficult for groups at risk of social and economic exclusion. A period of exponential change and radical discontinuity has had the general effect of disadvantaging further those least able to cope with changing conditions in what has been termed a 'winners take all' society (Thurow 1996, pp.20–4).

The general impact of globalisation, new information and communication technologies, a shift from an industrial and service economy, and major changes in the labour market and work have been widely recognised (ANTA 1998a; Kearns et al. 1999; Thurow 1996; Latham 1998).

The advent of a post-industrial information society in a globalised economy has profoundly impacted on the operation of the labour market and the organisation and nature of work, and the attributes and skills required by individuals to maintain employability (RSA 1998). The loss of low-skill jobs with these changes poses a further threat of social and economic exclusion for those previously dependent on such jobs.

At the same time, the rise of knowledge work has had the general effect of lifting the level of skills required for workforce participation, posing for individuals and groups who lack such skills, and a capability for lifelong learning, the prospect of long-term economic and social exclusion (Latham 1998, p.xxi).

The 'deepening social divide' accompanying these changes has drawn considerable comment (Dusseldorp Skills Forum 1999; OECD 1994). While much of this comment has focussed on groups such as youth and young adults who have been adversely affected in following the traditional pathways to employment and social participation (Dusseldorp Skills Forum 1998, 1999), broader studies from bodies such as OECD have explored the threats to social cohesion and equity deriving from these changes.

The growing polarisation between those 'learning rich' and able to cope with the challenge of a world of exponential change and uncertainty and those vulnerable to changing conditions raises the spectre of what Dahrendorf has called a 'two-thirds society' (OECD 1994, p.107). It has been argued by Lutz that this context of deepening social divisions requires social cohesion to be re-invented, underpinned by a new paradigm (OECD 1994, pp.108–9). A range of ways of rebuilding public mutuality and civic engagement as a basis for an inclusive, equitable society has been suggested (Latham 1998).

These social and economic changes have profound implications for equity policies and strategies in the sectors of education and training. There is evidence that the changes have been accompanied by shifts in attitudes and values, in particular among young people (Stevens & Michalinski 1994, pp.14–17; Lenk 1994, pp.81–7). Surveys in Germany have shown these shifts, while an international comparative study on work ethics conducted by the Allensbach Institute showed similar results (Lenk 1994, p.82). These studies also showed a 'scissors effect' with a generational and qualifications cleavage in life and work orientation between young and older people and those in the intermediate age group. Work orientation was also strongly influenced by the level of qualifications achieved and was least developed in those without qualifications or with lower level VET-type qualifications.

These findings, if replicated in Australia, have significant implications for equity policies and strategies, including the continuing divide between general and vocational education as, for example, at the VET/adult community education interface. There is evidence from both Australian and British surveys (ABS 1996; MORI 1998; Kearns et al. 1999, pp.38–41) that intrinsic values may be more important in participation decisions than external factors such as promotion, pay rises, and employer demands. Case studies undertaken by Harris and Violet (1997) on learning in the workplace support this conclusion. Evidence of such shifts in values and life and work orientation suggest the need to move beyond simple linear concepts of pathways from school into work to policies and strategies that recognise the growing complexity of the influences that condition participation in post-compulsory education and training and in social activity in this new era.

In a world of exponential change and uncertainty, the case for lifelong learning for all is being increasingly recognised (OECD 1996; Kearns et al. 1999). The danger of social and economic exclusion of those lacking a capability for lifelong learning is real. Continuing changes in the labour market and in the skill requirements of jobs, driven by new technologies, pose the danger of a 'more or less unemployable underclass' (Davidson & Rees-Mogg 1997, p.214). There is a compelling case that the attributes of lifelong learners must now be a necessary goal of equity policies and strategies in the emerging conditions of the twenty-first century.

In this context of transition to an information age, the socio-economic changes discussed above raise a new generation of equity issues, that have implications for all sectors of education and training. These issues require broad perspectives that link the sectors of education and training and connect them in new ways to the ongoing processes of change in the economy and in society.

## Cross-sectoral approach to equity

While our analysis confirms that progress has been made for most target groups in accessing post-compulsory education and training, less progress has been achieved in terms of equitable outcomes in the face of deep-seated barriers embedded in the conditions of Australian society. The contextual shifts discussed in this paper, and the growing imperatives for lifelong learning, make a co-ordinated cross-sectoral approach increasingly necessary.

Developing cross-sectoral collaboration for equity objectives would move the Australian education and training system in the direction of what OECD has termed 'Model 3' where fragmented structures become systemic—with a rich array of pathways, bridges, and supported transitions to assist individuals accessing education and training on a whole-of-life basis (OECD 1996, pp.135–40).

In a context of lifelong learning, the issues of cross-sectoral collaboration in pursuit of equity objectives is inevitably linked to the question of partnership between the education sectors and a wider spectrum of community partners, with much learning occurring in social contexts outside education institutions. The escalating impact of modern information and communication technologies will increase the significance of this consideration. This broader spectrum of partners will include community bodies, employers, industry associations, local government, and economic development agencies.

For this reason cross-sectoral policies and strategies should have two dimensions

- *vertical* with co-ordination of effort between the sectors of education and training
- *horizontal* with partnership development between the education sectors and other community groups

Overseas experience, in particular in Britain, suggests that local partnerships can play a key role in fostering cross-sectoral strategies along both dimensions. This approach was recommended by the Kennedy Committee on Widening Participation in Further Education in Britain (Kennedy 1997, p.46). This committee concluded 'local collaboration holds the key to success in widening participation'.

The Kennedy Committee also observed that differences and inconsistencies in funding arrangements reinforce division rather than promoting partnership.

A similar situation exists in Australia. Consequently, strengthening local partnerships as an equity strategy will require consideration of the funding implications, including the funding of the adult community education sector in its equity/pathways and 'second chance' roles.

## Learning cities: Partnerships in action

Examples of local partnerships to widen participation may be observed in the activities of 'Learning Cities' in Britain. British Learning Cities such as Glasgow, Sheffield, Norwich, and Kent County typically include access and equity objectives among the other objectives of the Learning City development. This enables a broad coalition of interested parties to be brought together to further these objectives. Some typical examples are:

### Glasgow

The four main themes of the Glasgow Learning Inquiry include:

- how to surmount the barriers to learning
- how to stimulate personal motivation to learn
- how to encourage institutions to improve quality in the supply and access to learning

Themed action groups involving all interested parties are addressing these themes.

### Kent County

The nine priorities of the Kent County strategy include:

- special provision for people with learning difficulties
- support for parents and families in continuing to learn

### Greater Nottingham Learning Partnership

The key objectives of the partnership include:

- to raise aspirations
- to raise stakeholder attainments
- to raise funding for these priorities

The Glasgow approach is of interest in illustrating the close integration of social and economic objectives within the integrated strategic framework devised by the Scottish economic development agency, Scottish Enterprise. This framework includes four strategic objectives:

- innovative, far-sighted organisations
- inclusion
- learning and enterprise
- competitive place

There are grounds for believing that better integration of social and economic policy and strategies is necessary if real opportunities are to be created for groups in danger of social and economic exclusion. Local partnerships along the lines cited above could play a key role in achieving more integrated and holistic approaches responsive to local conditions and needs. There is a strong case for experiment with pilot projects in Australia, in a wide range of contexts, to test the value of local partnerships as an equity strategy. Cross-sectoral collaboration between the education sectors would be a key component of local partnerships.

## Four levels for action

In a context that is increasingly complex and difficult for individuals and groups at risk of social and economic exclusion, there is a need for co-ordinated equity strategies to be developed and implemented at four levels. These levels are:

- *systemic:* national and State/Territory policies that provide a framework and incentives for action at the other levels
- *local:* local partnerships that link the sectors of education and training in co-ordinated action and link these sectors to other interested parties in a local community in partnership action
- *sectoral:* policies and strategies within the sectors of education and training that support equity objectives
- *institutional:* measures adopted by institutions to progress equity objectives

In a situation of transition towards lifelong learning in a learning society, we expect that the balance between these levels of action will shift over time. Until now the local level has been neglected, and equity policies and strategies have mainly been developed at the sectoral and institutional levels. However, progression towards a learning society that provides lifelong learning opportunities for all will require that linkages and connections between partners should be strengthened so that resources can be mobilised among providers and across sectors to maximise learning opportunities. This will require strengthening the systemic and cross-sectoral action levels.

Achieving a learning society will require a systemic view of the structure of education provision, recognising that learning occurs in many contexts, so that the different forms of learning will be seen as part of a linked system (OECD 1997). This will require, at the national and State and Territory levels, policies and strategies that develop systemic perspectives, both in linking the education sectors for shared objectives, and in relating the education and training system to other fields of social and economic activity. Funding policies will be a

significant aspect of action at this level in providing incentives for lifelong learning opportunities for all.

In the case of equity policies, this will require a national co-operative approach to equity in which action will be concerted between Commonwealth and State and Territory agencies, and other agencies. There is a need for considerable development effort in this area in the context of policies for lifelong learning.

The local level is the least developed level of action and we comment below on some of the opportunities that exist for innovative strategies, in particular in fostering local cross-sectoral partnerships. Until now, equity policy and strategies have mainly been developed on a sectoral basis, and this field will continue to be significant in providing a framework for initiatives by institutions. However, building more linkages between the sectors, as for example with the current initiative for vocational education and training in schools, will strengthen the outcomes from sectoral policies.

Institutions will continue to be the coalface of equity action, both in the action taken internally, and in their roles in cross-sectoral partnerships. Local cross-sectoral partnerships will support the internal action taken by institutions, and will strengthen their outreach role in extending learning opportunities to disadvantaged individuals and groups.

The available evidence in sectoral equity reports suggests that past action taken by institutions has been uneven and patchy. While many examples of good practice exist and have been documented, it is evident that many institutions have not given a high priority to equity objectives in a context of increasing funding pressures and market-driven policies. Making equity systemic throughout all institutions will require funding policies that provide appropriate incentives for institutions and individuals, and which address the disincentives arising from some aspects of current policies.

## Rethinking equity strategies

The growing imperatives for lifelong learning in a context of exponential change and uncertainty add to the case for reconsideration of equity concepts, objectives, and strategies.

Traditional concepts of access, participation, and success are based on a linear notion of pathways to jobs that largely define an individual's role and status in society. In a context where work is being redefined, along with familiar concepts such as career, a concept of linear pathways to jobs is no longer adequate as a basis for equity strategies.

It is clear that the nub of the problem of equity relates to outcomes as much as to access and participation. The focus of equity policies and strategies should, therefore, be on the barriers that entrench social and economic exclusion of disadvantaged individuals and groups, and on strategies that successfully address these barriers. Local partnerships have the potential to provide genuine pathways to employment for members of disadvantaged groups involved in education and training.

While a rethinking of equity strategies will require a substantial process of consultation and analysis, some of the considerations that will need to be taken into account include:

- the need to move beyond traditional equity target groups to consider individual requirement and disadvantage and to identify strategies that address these needs
- the need to focus on socio-economic outcomes, including maintaining employability and a capacity to participate in society
- the need to relate equity programs to the growing imperatives for lifelong learning to ensure that all Australians are assisted to acquire a capability for further learning. This will require demand-side policies that address attitudes and motivation for learning and that provide appropriate incentives for learning. What is needed is a revolution in aspirations and achievement

- the forging of local partnerships to pursue equity objectives that integrate social, educational, and economic objectives in holistic strategies

This broader, eclectic approach to equity will require means of monitoring and evaluating outcomes that go beyond the traditional indicators of educational access, participation, success and retention.

This approach to equity, which links education more closely to socio-economic outcomes, will need to be closely related to strategies to progress Australia as a learning society. In this way equity objectives would be brought into the mainstream of the emerging national debate on a new paradigm for Australia's development. Concepts such as 'Third Way', 'Open Australia', and 'Social Coalition' have the capacity to help the development of the definition of such a paradigm. A partnership approach to equity at all levels, with cross-sectoral collaboration a key element, could contribute much to the definition of a new paradigm for Australia's development that is just and inclusive.

This approach would also be consistent with the view of the UNESCO Delors Commission on the need to rethink and broaden the notion of lifelong learning:

> *There is a need to rethink and broaden the notion of lifelong education. Not only must it adapt to changes in the nature of work, but it must also constitute a continuous process of forming whole human beings—their knowledge and aptitudes, as well as the critical faculty and the ability to act. It should enable people to develop awareness of themselves and their environment and encourage them to play their social role at work and in the community* (UNESCO 1996, p.21).

The concept of a fresh approach to equity based on cross-sectoral strategies and local partnerships, and underpinned by an orientation towards lifelong learning, raises a broad spectrum of issues that go beyond the scope of this paper. These issues include funding issues in a context where there are few incentives for institutions to collaborate in partnerships directed at equity objectives.

In a context of transition to lifelong learning, it is important that funding policies should provide incentives for both institutions to collaborate in cross-sectoral partnerships, and for disadvantaged individuals to continue learning throughout life. Innovative concepts, such as the entitlement scheme proposed by Jacques Delors in the report of the UNESCO Commission on Education for the 21st Century could have considerable value in encouraging equity strategies that provide incentives for disadvantaged early school leavers to return to education. The inclusion of this concept in the NCVER research program for 1999 is a welcome step.

The contextual shifts outlined earlier make it essential that equity strategies are now planned in a framework of lifelong learning objectives. This will require demand-side policies that provide incentives for those most in danger of social and economic exclusion to continue in education and training on a whole-of-life basis, and to raise aspirations. Support systems, both within institutions and in the community, will be required. Much will be achieved by co-ordinating action in such areas as the provision of information and guidance, as is happening in Britain in line with policies for lifelong learning.

Emerging strategies such as Learning Cities and learning communities could play a significant role in a cross-sectoral partnership approach to equity. As yet, there is no policy or funding framework to encourage the development of Learning City partnerships in Australia.

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